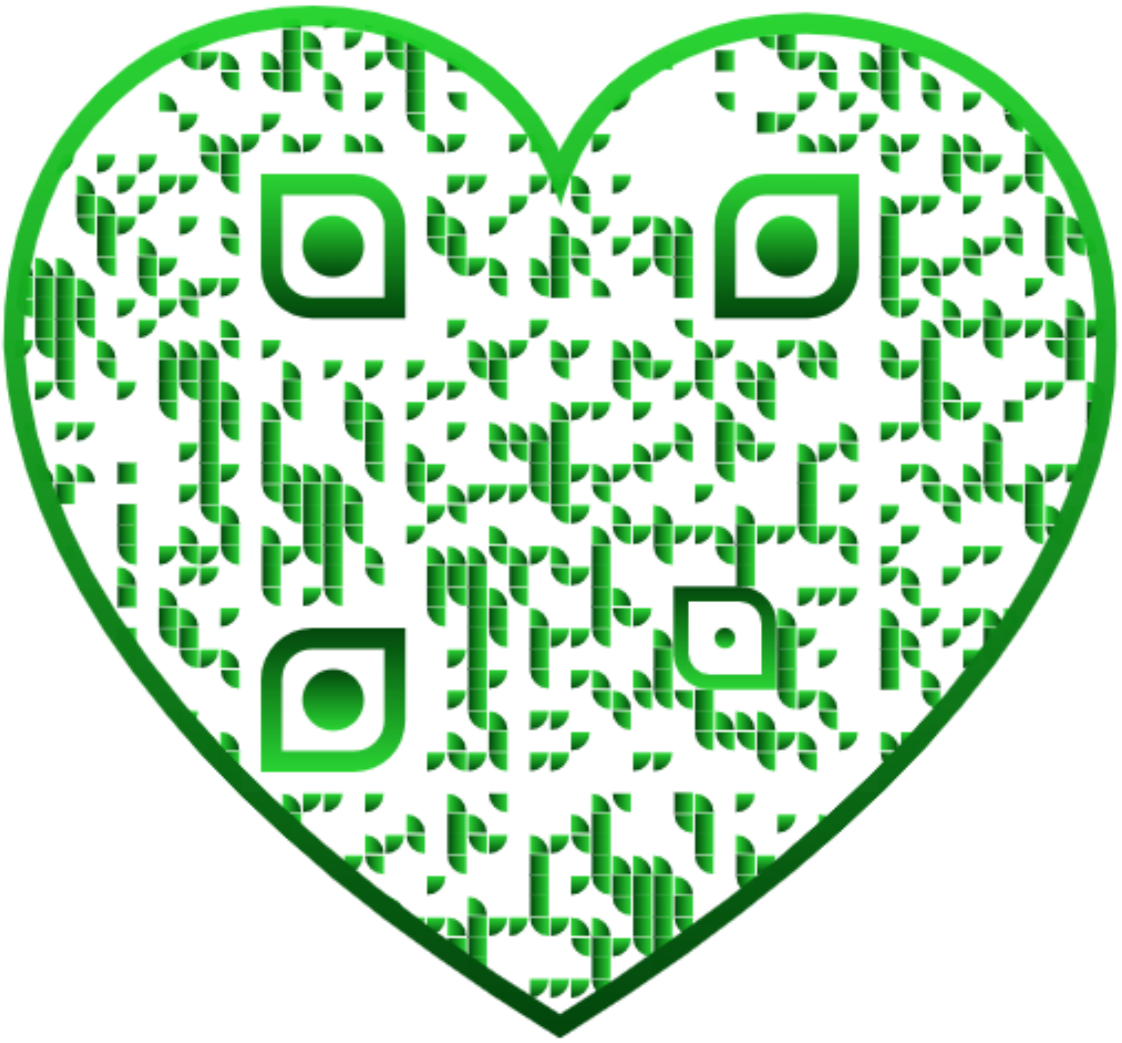
EDWIN BERNBAUM

Sacred Mountains of the World

SECOND EDITION



SACRED MOUNTAINS OF THE WORLD

Second Edition

From the Andes to the Himalayas, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke a sense of the sacred. In the overwhelming wonder and awe that these dramatic features of the landscape awaken, people experience something of deeper significance that imbues their lives with meaning and vitality. Drawing on his extensive research and personal experience as a scholar and climber, Edwin Bernbaum's *Sacred Mountains of the World* takes the reader on a fascinating journey exploring the role of mountains in the mythologies, religions, history, literature, and art of cultures around the world. Bernbaum delves into the spiritual dimensions of mountaineering and the implications of sacred mountains for environmental and cultural preservation. This beautifully written, evocative book shows how the contemplation of sacred mountains can transform everyday life, even in cities far from the peaks themselves.

Thoroughly revised and updated, this new edition considers additional sacred mountains, as well as the impacts of climate change on the sacredness of mountains.

Edwin Bernbaum is a mountaineer and scholar of comparative religion and mythology whose work focuses on the relationship between culture and nature. The first edition of *Sacred Mountains of the World* won the Commonwealth Club of California's gold medal for nonfiction and the Giuseppe Mazzotti Special Jury Prize in Italy for literature of mountains, exploration, and ecology, as well as being shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountaineering Literature in the United Kingdom. His book *The Way to Shambhala* on Tibetan myths and legends of sacred hidden valleys was originally published by Anchor Doubleday in 1980. He holds an AB from Harvard College and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley.

SACRED MOUNTAINS OF THE WORLD

Second Edition

EDWIN BERNBAUM

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CONTENTS

Preface to the Second Edition *page* ix
Acknowledgments xiii

INTRODUCTION: MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED 1

PART I Sacred Mountains Around The World 13

1 THE HIMALAYAS: ABODE OF THE SACRED 15

2 CHINA: MOUNTAINS OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM 44

3 CENTRAL ASIA: THE DISTANT RANGES 67

4 JAPAN: MOUNTAINS OF THE RISING SUN 80

5 SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: COSMIC CENTERS 103

6 THE MIDDLE EAST: HEIGHTS OF REVELATION 120

7 EUROPE: PARADIGMS OF PERFECTION 146

8 AFRICA: FACING THE HEIGHTS 179

9 NORTH AMERICA: THE HIGH AND THE BEAUTIFUL 196

10 LATIN AMERICA: MOUNTAINS OF VANISHED EMPIRES 232

11 OCEANIA: ISLANDS OF THE SKY 256

PART II The Power And Mystery Of Mountains 279

12 THE SYMBOLISM OF SACRED MOUNTAINS 281

13 MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED IN LITERATURE AND ART 296

14 THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF MOUNTAINEERING 321

15 SACRED MOUNTAINS, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND EVERYDAY LIFE 337

Notes 355

Select Bibliography 380

Index 386

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Just as various routes of ascent converge at the top of a mountain, writing this book has brought together diverse interests that have shaped the course of my life. Some of my earliest and most influential memories are of magical views of snow-capped peaks in the Andes, where I lived as a young child and where I began mountain climbing as a teenager. Later, the Peace Corps offered me the opportunity to live in Nepal, within sight of the highest mountains on earth. As a result of my experiences climbing and trekking in the Himalayas, I wrote a book on Tibetan myths of hidden valleys and their symbolism and completed a doctorate in Asian Studies in the area of comparative religion and mythology. Emerging as a natural extension of my interests – physical, intellectual, and spiritual – *Sacred Mountains of the World* grew out of seminars I gave at the University of California Berkeley Extension and the Smithsonian Institution.

Because of the broad appeal and fascination of the subject, I have written this book for a general audience, as well as for specialists. Readers intrigued by myth and religion, art and literature, mountaineering and travel, wilderness and the environment, or cross-cultural studies and spirituality may find something that touches on their interests in this book. The book will also prove useful to scholars in diverse fields – from art history, comparative literature, and anthropology to geography, environmental studies, and the history of religions.

Drawing on experiences of people in both traditional and contemporary societies, the Introduction examines the physical and spiritual qualities that give mountains their extraordinary power to awaken a sense of the sacred. Part I explores the rich, diverse significance of sacred mountains in cultures throughout the world. Each chapter gives an overview of the mountains in a particular region and what they mean to the people who revere them, then focuses on a few representative peaks. Some of these peaks – such as Olympos, Fuji, and Sinai – are well known. Others were chosen for a variety of reasons: religious and historical importance, geographic balance, themes illustrated, availability of information, mountaineering significance, bearing on environmental and cultural issues, and my own personal interests. Part II begins with a chapter on symbolism, identifying the major themes found in traditional views of sacred mountains and establishing an approach to understanding the ways they awaken a sense of the sacred. The next chapter draws on this

approach to take a fresh look at well-known works of literature and art to see how they use mountain imagery to transform our perceptions of the world and ourselves. The following chapter explores the spiritual dimensions of mountaineering. The final chapter examines the ways in which the study and contemplation of sacred mountains can help us to appreciate the value of wilderness, promote conservation of the environment, and live deeper, more meaningful lives.

To my regret, I have had to leave out a number of major regions and mountains. Korea deserved a chapter to itself, but I did not have the space to do it justice. Because of such limitations, I could only mention sacred mountains such as Chomolhari in Bhutan and Mount Diablo in California, near where I live. To make room for new mountains and research in the second edition, I had to shorten and remove some older material. If the number of chapters devoted to Asia (five out of the eleven chapters in Part I) seems disproportionate, the reader should bear in mind that the continent holds more than half the world's population as well as the greatest land mass and highest peaks on earth.

Since the original publication of *Sacred Mountains of the World* in 1990, I have visited and done field research on many mountains that I had not been able to visit previously. The second edition draws on that research, adding new material and personal experiences to sections on various mountains ranging from Tai Shan in China to Mount Athos in Greece. In addition, I was able to return to peaks I had previously visited, such as Mount Kailas in Tibet, where I completed the ritual circumambulation of the sacred mountain. The second edition includes a number of new mountains, such as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, Burkhan Khaldun in Mongolia, and Devils Tower in the United States. The new format of the second edition focuses on the text with only a few photographs, all black and white, most of them new images taken by me since 1990. I have added material based on events since the publication of the first edition, including controversies over placing telescopes on Mauna Kea in Hawai'i and over making snow from grey water on the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona. The second edition makes extensive use of research published in articles and books that have appeared since 1990.

I have also drawn on work I have done on projects that came out of writing the first edition of the book. An invitation to give a keynote on the policy implications of sacred mountains at an international conference led to participation in an innovative project at a pilgrimage shrine in the Himalayas that motivated pilgrims from all over India to restore a sacred forest for reasons coming out of their religious traditions. Noting parallels in the way that National Parks function as secular shrines drawing visitors from all over America, I initiated a program working with interpreters at various parks,

such as Yosemite and Hawai'i Volcanoes, to develop interpretive materials based on the inspirational meanings and associations of features of mountain environments in mainstream American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and other cultures around the world. Writing *Sacred Mountains of the World* also led to work on a project to nominate Mount Kailas in Tibet and the pilgrimage routes leading to it as a World Heritage site. In addition, I have been working on an international program to integrate the cultural and spiritual significance of nature into the management and governance of protected areas in general. Along with discussions of these projects, the second edition includes a new section on climate change and its impacts on mountains and their sacredness.

Since the first edition of *Sacred Mountains of the World* appeared in 1990, there has been a growing interest in sacred places and a deepening recognition that they provide a sustainable basis for programs of environmental and cultural preservation. When people revere a mountain or other natural site, it acquires for them a special value that makes it worth protecting at all costs – an ultimate value that may, in fact, transcend all cost. To be effective in the long term, environmental programs require the kind of respect for nature found in views of sacred mountains. Without an underlying sense that nature possesses something of deeper reality or significance, conservation efforts lack the bedrock of commitment needed to sustain them. To this end *Sacred Mountains of the World* provides a wealth of useful information and background material for scientists, environmentalists, protected area managers, policy makers, and others who recognize the need to take the spiritual and cultural significance of nature into account in doing research and protecting the environment.

A few matters regarding terminology, style, and content bear mention. First, this book recounts a great number of myths about sacred mountains. I use the word *myth* to refer to stories, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that express what people in a particular culture or tradition take to be ultimately real. On a superficial level, myths may be factually true or false. At a deeper level they embody deeply held views of reality – the basic, often unconscious, but necessary assumptions that guide people in their lives and interactions with the world around them.

For simplicity and ease in reading, I have avoided the use of unusual diacritical marks, such as the ones used to transliterate Sanskrit and Japanese terms. Those who know them will recognize the words and be able to supply such marks for themselves. To streamline the text and highlight primary sources, I have put much of the scholarly apparatus with references to informants and scholars in the endnotes. Since many readers in the United States, including myself, have a more visceral feel for feet and miles, I have used them rather than meters and kilometers for altitudes and distances. For those who prefer the metric system, computers make conversions between the two

systems very easy. Finally, a book of this scope is bound to contain mistakes, and I apologize for any errors found in these pages.

The writing of *Sacred Mountains of the World* has been a personal encounter with sacred mountains that has enriched my life, elevated my gaze, and broadened my horizons in ways I could never have imagined. I hope that the reader will have a similar experience in reading this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the many people who have helped me with the research, writing, and publication of the first and second editions of *Sacred Mountains of the World*. To my delight some of the greatest rewards of working on this project have been the friendships that have come out of it. The interest and enthusiasm that others share with me have confirmed my view that the subject of this book has as much to do with people and their relationship to mountains as with the mountains themselves.

Thinking it was a detective novel about a teenage girl named Annapurna, my sister Marcy checked Maurice Herzog's mountaineering classic *Annapurna* out of the library. When she discovered it was about the first expedition to the Himalayan mountain of that name, she tossed it aside. I came across the book, and it inspired a boyhood interest in climbing that led me ultimately to the subject of sacred mountains. Years later, in Nepal, I had the fortune to spend time with Annulu, an extraordinary Sherpa who exemplified many of the values associated with sacred mountains. Raimon Panikkar encouraged me to devote myself to writing *Sacred Mountains of the World*. Lynne Kaufman and Edmund Worthy arranged seminars I gave at the University of California Berkeley Extension and the Smithsonian Institution, out of which this book grew. Larry Hamilton and Jane Pratt played key roles in getting me involved in programs relating sacred mountains to environmental and cultural conservation.

So many people have helped me that if I credited them fully, the acknowledgments would make a chapter in itself. I am therefore listing them briefly, in no particular order. My apologies for leaving anyone out. The Tengboche Rinpoche, Kalsang Namgyal, Kaldhen Sherpa, Gautam Vajracharya, Aditya Purohit, P. P. Dhyani, Mukti Datta, Abhimanyu Pandey, Harold Arnold, H. Adams Carter, Matthew Kapstein, Frances Klatzel, Frits Staal, Stan Stevens, Arlene Blum, and Hugh Swift all shared their knowledge and experience of the Himalayas. Bakyt Amanbaeva, Raoul Birnbaum, Judith Boltz, William Doub, Lewis Lancaster, William Powell, Marilyn Rhie, Anna Seidel, Eldiar Sydykov, and Lilia Ten helped me with China and Central Asia. Minoru Harashida, Kiyoshige Ida, Makoto Motonaka, Kiyohide Saito, Shiro Tanabe, Fumiko Umezawa, Nikki Naoko Aoki, Ayako Fujita, and Souhachi Hatakehori went out of their way to help me in Japan. I received

additional assistance on Japan from H. Byron Earhart, Allan Grapard, Christine Guth, Laurel Kendall, Henry Smith, Richard Payne, Nobuko Inaba, and Maya Ishizawa. For South and Southeast Asia, I am indebted to Eric Oey, Imade Budi, Robert del Bontá, Eric Crystal, Patrick Harrigan, David Sanford, Wayne Surdam, and Barend van Nooten.

Martin Schwartz, Pinchas Giller, David Robertson, John Lindow, Zeph Stewart, Barbara Ehringhaus, Bernard Amy, Antoine van Limburg, Benyamin Tsedaka, Ibrahim Dabbek, Subhi Abu-Ghosh, Archbishop Damaiamos, David Enelow, China Galland, Maria Kotzamanidou, Hector McDonnell, Zeph Stewart, and Lance Morrow provided observations and assistance in the Middle East and Europe. For assistance in doing research in Greece, I am indebted to Johan Reinhard, Dan Bennet, Rita Charitakis, Kostas Zolotas, Dimitios Pandemalis, Helen Benaki, Elena Partida, George Martzoukas, and monks and fellow pilgrims on Mount Athos. Ian Allain, Alan Bechky, Clive Ward, and Willy Makundi assisted me with African mountains.

For American Indian views I am grateful to Wilson Aronilth, Jr., Theresa Boone, Will Channing, David Luhan, Barbara Duncan, Marilyn Harris, Leanne Hinton, Phyllis Hogan, C. Benson Hufford, Florence Jones, Charles Thoms, Wilmer Kavena, Hartman Lomawaima, José Lucero, Jim Enote, Peter Nabokov, Jerry Wolfe, Paul Robinson, Christopher McLeod, and John Wood. I want to thank Ecuadorean friends who introduced me to the joys of climbing, in particular, Jack Bermeo, Leonardo Droira, and Romulo Pazmiño. Washington Rozas Alvarez, Narcisso Ccahuana, Winston Crausaz, Jorge Recharte, Johan Reinhard, Guillermo Rodriquez Navaro, and Jesus Qhana T'ito helped me with Latin America. Peter Ruka, Maurice Gray, Rakeipoho Taiaroa, Te Ngaehe Wanikau, Kiri Tumarae, Naomi Teka, Bubs Smith, Pat Devlin, Paul Green, Bruce Jefferies, Margaret Orbell, and Margaret McKinzie-Hooson provided valuable help on Maori views in New Zealand. Thanks to Apela Colorado and Hale Kealohalani Makua and to Jim Gale, Jim Martin, Cynthia Orlando, Keola Awong, Tom Peek, and others at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park for sharing their knowledge of Hawaiian culture. Jeffrey Falt, Kal Muller, and Rudy Wenk contributed material on mountains elsewhere in Oceania. James Cahill, Roger Keyes, Roger Lipsey, and Mimi Lobell helped with art.

I would like to acknowledge the people with whom I worked on projects having to do with National Parks, conservation, and World Heritage, including John Jarvis, Timothy Manns, John Reynolds, Dave Uberuaga, Mechtild Röesler, Thomas Schaaf, Chris Stein, Ted Stout, Kent Cave, Kyra Busch, and Ken Wilson, as well as colleagues at The Mountain Institute, ICIMOD, and the IUCN, including Jeremy Spoon, Jonah Steinberg, Elsie Walker, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, Brian Peniston, Andrew Taber, Bob Davis, Gabriel Campbell,

Rajan Kotru, Eklabya Sharma, Abhimanyu Pandey, Josep-Maria Mallarach, Bas Verschuuren, Gonzalo Oviedo, and Fausto Sarmiento. Thanks to the staffs at GeoEx and Mountain Travel for sharing their knowledge and arranging various trips I led. I am grateful for financial support from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, Christensen Fund, Compton Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Ford Foundation, Kendeda Fund, National Geographic Society, German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN), American Alpine Club, UNESCO, IUCN, ICIMOD, Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Mountain Wilderness International, and the United States-Japan Foundation.

I want to thank the following people for reading parts of the manuscript and providing other assistance: Alan Bechky, Raoul Birnbaum, Jeffrey Falt, Pat Devlin, Pinchas Giller, Allan Grapard, Stuart Kelman, Roger Keyes, John Lindow, Roger Lipsey, Peter Nabokov, Margaret McKinzie-Hooson, Scotty McLennan, H. Arlo Nimmo, Margaret Orbell, Richard Payne, Bruce Phillips, David Robertson, Tom Peek, Anna Seidel, William Shumate, Henry Smith, Zeph Stewart, and Hugh Swift.

My editor for the first edition, Linda Gunnarson, played a crucial role in helping me to craft this book with her astute suggestions, critical eye, and unflagging attention to detail. My agent, Joe Spieler, appeared at just the right moment to make the book a reality. I am indebted to Abhimanyu Pandey, Siddharth Pandey, and Kevin Taylor for putting me in touch with Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press. Beatrice's immediate interest, enthusiastic support, and valuable advice made possible the second edition of *Sacred Mountains of the World*. My thanks to Sarah Lambert, Raghavi Govindane, Carol Bailey, and Joseph Shaw for the care they have taken in finalizing this edition of the book.

Finally, I want to thank my family for putting up with my occasional moaning and groaning as I worked my way up the mountain of writing this book. My wife Diane's unfailing love and encouragement helped me to lift my eyes and sustain the vision needed to finish the climb by completing the second edition. She listened with infinite patience as I read passages out loud and offered essential criticism. In the liveliness of their enthusiasm and the love they gave me from the time they were very young, my sons David and Jonathan played a role of paramount importance by reminding me of the sense of wonder and delight that sacred mountains and this book are all about.

INTRODUCTION

MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED

As the highest and most dramatic features of the natural landscape, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke the sacred. The ethereal rise of a ridge in mist, the glint of moonlight on an icy face, a flare of gold on a distant peak – such glimpses of transcendent beauty can reveal our world as a place of unimaginable mystery and splendor. In the fierce play of natural elements that swirl about their summits – thunder, lightning, wind, and clouds – mountains also embody powerful forces beyond our control, physical expressions of an awesome reality that can overwhelm us with feelings of wonder and fear.

People have traditionally revered mountains as places of sacred power and spiritual attainment. Sinai and Zion in the Middle East, Olympos in Greece, Kailas in Tibet, Tai Shan in China, Fuji in Japan, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona – all have acquired a special stature as natural objects of devotion. Speaking of the ability of these mountains to arouse spontaneous feelings of reverence and awe, Lama Anagarika Govinda, a Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, wrote:

> The power of such a mountain is so great and yet so subtle that, without compulsion, people are drawn to it from near and far, as if by the force of some invisible magnet; and they will undergo untold hardships and privations in their inexplicable urge to approach and to worship the center of this sacred power. Nobody has conferred the title of sacredness on such a mountain, and yet everybody recognizes it; nobody has to defend its

> claim, because nobody doubts it; nobody has to organize its worship, because people are overwhelmed by the mere presence of such a mountain and cannot express their feelings other than by worship.[1]

Throughout the world people of traditional religious cultures have looked to mountains as symbols of their highest spiritual goals. Reflecting such a view of the heights, a nineteenth-century Japanese account describes the quest of a Buddhist monk named Shodo to climb Nantaizan, a sacred peak formerly known as Fudaraku:

> In this very same province is a mountain called Fudaraku, whose peaks soar into the Milky Way, whose snow-covered summit touches the emerald walls of the sky . . . The Master of the Law [Shodo] . . . urged his will onward . . . "If I do not reach the top of this mountain, I shall never be able to achieve Awakening!" After having uttered this vow, he moved across the flashing snows and walked over the young leaves shining like jewels; when he had gone half the way up, his body was exhausted, his strength left him. He rested for two days and finally came to see the summit: his ecstasy was like that in a dream, he felt a vertigo like that of Awakening.[2]

For Shodo and others who followed him, the summit of the sacred mountain was a place to attain an inspiring glimpse of enlightenment, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path.

Even today, in the modern secular world, mountains are regarded as embodiments of humanity's highest ideals and aspirations. Expeditions to Mount Everest and other high peaks stand out as symbols of supreme efforts, of attempts by men and women to overcome their limitations and attain transcendent goals. Whether they realize it or not, many who hike and climb for sport and recreation are seeking an experience of spiritual awakening akin to that sought by people of traditional cultures. Maurice Herzog, the leader of the 1950 French expedition that made the first ascent of Annapurna – the first of the highest Himalayan peaks to be climbed – describes a dramatic example of such an experience as he approached the unclimbed summit:

> I felt as though I were plunging into something new and quite abnormal. I had the strangest and most vivid impressions, such as I had never before known in the mountains. There was something unnatural in the way I saw Lachenal [Herzog's companion] and everything around us. I smiled to myself at the paltriness of our efforts, for I could stand apart and watch myself making these efforts. But all sense of exertion was gone, as though there were no longer any gravity. This diaphanous landscape, this quintessence of purity – these were not the mountains I knew: they were the mountains of my dreams.
>
> An astonishing happiness welled up in me, but I could not define it. Everything was so new, so utterly unprecedented. It was not in the least

> like anything I had known in the Alps, where one feels buoyed up by the presence of others – by people of whom one is vaguely aware, or even by the dwellings one can see in the far distance.
>
> This was quite different. An enormous gulf was between me and the world. This was a different universe – withered, desert, lifeless; a fantastic universe where the presence of man was not foreseen, perhaps not desired. We were braving an interdict, overstepping a boundary, and yet we had no fear as we continued upward. I thought of the famous ladder of St. Theresa of Avila. Something clutched at my heart.[3]

These two accounts – traditional Eastern and modern Western – illustrate a few of the many different ways people experience the sacred in mountains around the world. In many of these experiences, we find descriptions of an encounter with something totally apart from the world we ordinarily know – what the German scholar of religions Rudolf Otto termed the "wholly other" – an inscrutable mystery that attracts and repels us with intense feelings of wonder and awe. This source of fascination and fear may appear divine or demonic, assuming the form of a god or the shape of a demon. Whether it reveals a vision of heaven or hell, the encounter with the sacred moves us to the depths of our being to disclose a realm of existence beyond the power of words to describe.[4]

Floating above the clouds, materializing out of the mist, mountains appear to belong to a world utterly different from the one we know, inspiring in us the experience of the sacred as the wholly other. Their dark forests, jagged cliffs, and twisted glaciers evoke impressions of a strange and alien universe. Their summits, barren and lifeless, often brilliant with snow, are harsh and forbidding places graced with incredible beauty, where only those with extraordinary powers or skills can survive. A description of the Alps at twilight by the Italian climber Guido Rey reveals the awesome impression that mountains can make as manifestations of the wholly other:

> [T]he peaks seemed to shine alone in the colorless vault, and to hang as if they did not touch the earth; they were like unreal shapes, created from nothing, like phantoms that live by night in the terrible heights of the sky and only appear now and then to sleepers in their dreams.
>
> I did not recognize the beautiful forms I had seen by day; they had increased beyond measure, they had changed their appearance, they no longer belonged to our world; they were shadows of other unknown mountains cast by an unexplained phenomenon on to our sky by some distant star.
>
> An irresistible shudder assailed us . . .[5]

Of all the features of the landscape, mountains most dramatically inspire a sense of awe in the presence of overwhelming forces capable of annihilating us in an instant. Like the Ark of the Covenant in the Bible, they must be approached with caution and respect. Those who are careless in the heights

do not live long: a slight mistake, a disregard of the weather, and one can fall or freeze to death. Accordingly, people of traditional cultures have commonly regarded mountains as the dangerous haunts of gods and demons. A Chinese poem composed in the third century BCE conveys a vivid sense of the holy terror that the experience of mountain climbing can provoke:

> Climb higher and gaze into the distance,
> Your heart will be gripped with fear.
> Cirques of chasms surrounded by peaks,
> Frowning cliffs all around;
> Loose rocks that lean over the abyss,
> Escarpments that overhang each other
> . . . . . .
> Clinging like a climbing bear,
> you remain frozen in place,
> Perspiration dripping down to your feet.
> You feel yourself lost, reeling,
> Transfixed with anguish, out of yourself;
> And your spirit, shaken loose,
> plunges into terrors without cause.[6]

Mountains may so overwhelm us with their size and grandeur that we feel like insects crawling upon them. Gaston Rébuffat, one of Herzog's companions on Annapurna, wrote:

> And up on the mountain we began our ant-like labours. What is a man on an ice-world up in the sky? At that altitude he is no more than a will straining in a spent machine.[7]

More casual travelers often remark on how insignificant they feel in the presence of high and impressive peaks. Mountains rise over the surrounding countryside in undisputed splendor, sovereigns of the valleys, plains, and lesser hills beneath them; they are commonly described as "majestic" and "mighty." Unlike the reign of human kings, theirs seems eternal and incorruptible, like that of the highest gods, who sit enthroned on their lofty summits.

The majestic power of the sacred reflects the forces that have formed the mountains themselves. Volcanoes, in particular, erupt with a fiery wrath that consumes everything in its path. We can do nothing to stop this energy – we can only get out of its way. The same holds true for the icy fury of an avalanche or a raging blizzard of snow. Such events are often interpreted by traditional peoples as expressions of divine displeasure. Even a person who does not believe in supernatural entities will be moved by the natural power of mountains – and pause a moment to wonder if he or she really understands it.

The power of the sacred can take the form of all-pervading love, as well as all-consuming wrath. In fact, mystics often speak of their experience of divine

love as a scorching heat they can hardly bear. A famous passage by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal describes such an experience:

> From about half past ten in the evening until about half past midnight – FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace.[8]

The sacred does not simply present itself to our gaze: it reaches out to seize us in its searing grasp.

Like the sight of a mountain peak breaking free from the earth to leap toward the open sky, the experience of the sacred can send our spirits soaring to sublime heights of bliss and rapture, uplifting us with visions of beauty and goodness beyond our wildest dreams. The sacred can also give us a sense of reassuring serenity and fulfillment. The fascination that it inspires leads to feelings of love and devotion so intense that we would give anything, even our lives, to remain in its presence. Mountains, in particular, have the power to arouse such feelings of overwhelming devotion.

Despite the hardship and fear encountered on the heights, people return again and again, seeking something they cannot put into words. Religious pilgrims are drawn to a power or presence they sense in a peak; tourists come to gaze on splendid views; trekkers return to wander in a realm apart from the everyday world. The fascination of mountains casts a particular spell on mountaineers, who knowingly risk their lives for the sense of exultation they get in ascending a high and dangerous mountain – or just being there on its heights. One well-known British mountaineer, Frank Smythe, reportedly languished and died of a broken heart when he was denied permission to climb Kangchenjunga, a Himalayan peak that he had set his mind on climbing. Reflecting the sentiments of many of her fellow mountaineers, the Australian climber Freda Du Faur expressed the religious nature of the fascination that mountains had for her:

> From the moment that my eyes rested on the snow-clad Alps [of New Zealand] I worshipped their beauty and was filled with a passionate yearning to touch these shining snows, to climb to their heights of silence and solitude, and feel myself one with the mighty forces around me.[9]

Immersed in a landscape of incredible grandeur, we may find it easy to let go of our feelings of separateness and merge with the mountains around us or feel at home in their awesome presence. One evening at sunset, while climbing high in the Himalayas, I lingered outside my tent to watch the light fade off the surrounding peaks. Across a pool of dark clouds, the highest summits burned with a red glow that seemed to warm my body, as if I were standing before a fire. The light blazing on their snows gradually cooled to pink, then suddenly

went out, and the peaks appeared to turn into grey mounds of ash. At that moment, just as I expected them to take on a cold, hostile cast, a lavender glow, shading to green near the horizon, rose in the sky to the north, over Tibet, and I felt a friendly presence envelop me, as if the mountains themselves were extending me their welcome.

Not everyone experiences the sacred as the wholly other. Many find the sense of mystery it evokes right here in the midst of the world we think we know, even in what lies closest to us – ourselves. We live with ourselves every moment of our lives, but we scarcely know ourselves as we truly are. To know oneself, according to Hindu philosophy, is to attain the supreme realization of one's identity with the mysterious essence of the universe itself. To reduce the mystery of the sacred to the wholly other would condemn each person to remain forever alienated from his or her true self. Realizing their intimate relationship with God, Jewish mystics strive to sanctify each moment of their lives in order to become aware of a divine spark in all things and living creatures. The Navajo and the Hopi of the American Southwest revere every rock and feature of the landscape in which humans live.

The sacred is profoundly mysterious, not just as the wholly other, but as an embodiment of the unknown itself. It is the aura of mystery, of something beyond our ken, that attracts us. We are drawn to the sacred precisely because it is unknowable – something that remains mysterious even when we are in its presence. We find this fascination reflected in the twinge of disappointment we feel when an unclimbed peak has been climbed. Something about the peak that gave it a special quality vanishes, and it becomes in some sense ordinary, like the rest of the world, no matter how distant or exotic it may be. There is a profound attraction in the very fact that a peak is unexplored or unclimbed. In a similar way, the sacred by its very nature eludes all our attempts to define and grasp it. Without some inner core of inscrutable mystery, it ceases to be sacred.

Mountains have a special power to evoke the sacred as the unknown. Their deep valleys and high peaks conceal what lies hidden within and beyond them, luring us to venture ever deeper into a realm of enticing mystery. Mountains seem to beckon to us, holding out the promise of something on the ineffable edge of awareness. There, just out of sight, over the next ridge, behind a summit, lies the secret, half-forgotten essence of our childhood memories and dreams. The British climber Julie Tullis wrote of going up a remote glacier near K2, the second highest mountain in the world: "As we explored our way up the stony side moraine which followed along the side of the ice towers, I felt like a child at Christmas, the excited anticipation and then the thrilling pleasure of actually discovering what was hidden by the wrapping paper."

Rudyard Kipling captured this aspect of the mystery of mountains in his well-known lines:

> Something hidden. Go and find it.
> Go and look behind the Ranges –
> Something lost behind the Ranges.
> Lost and waiting for you. Go!

That something lost behind the ranges may be a material treasure, some part of ourselves, or the highest spiritual truth – whatever holds the answer to our deepest longings.[10]

The unknown also possesses a darker, more dangerous side: instead of our salvation, it may hold our damnation. The person who ventures into an unexplored range or tries to climb an unclimbed peak always harbors some fear that instead of what she seeks, she will find disaster and death. Even the hiker who goes into mountains that others know well may feel a trace of apprehension. What he finds there in the unknown may shatter his illusions and the comfortable world they uphold. Driven beyond the limits of physical endurance, he may discover things about himself – weaknesses and fears – that he would rather not know.

Although it may threaten everything we hold dear, the experience of the sacred opens up a new vision of reality that can free us from the stifling confines of the world to which we cling. We find this aspect of the sacred epitomized in the views that open around us as we climb to the top of a mountain. New and previously unknown vistas unfold around us as we emerge into the sun from the dark recesses of a narrow valley. The horizon recedes into the distance, revealing ridge after ridge of mountain ranges without end. As we gain a high promontory or a lofty summit, we may take a deep breath and feel as if we could take off and soar.

At a deeper level, the experience of the sacred as the unknown opens us to the ultimate mystery of reality itself. Just when we think we have grasped the nature of things as they are, some new aspect appears to confound our knowledge and understanding. As we climb a mountain, no matter how far our view may expand, something always lies hidden beyond the next horizon. In the encounter with the sacred, we have a sudden intuition of a reality that extends beyond the limits of what we know – or can ever fathom.

The sacred is not merely the unknown, but the unknown that people regard as ultimately real. The historian of religions Mircea Eliade has written "the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*."[11] What we truly revere has a quality that sets it apart from everything else, making it seem as solid and real as a mountain made of granite. This quality of mountains contributes to the aura of sanctity that tends to settle upon their summits. The

Bible describes them as the "eternal hills," implying that they have a more enduring reality than the plains around them. As the 125th Psalm declares:

> They that trust in the Lord
> Are as mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.[12]

As a manifestation of ultimate reality, the sacred is often distinguished from the profane, which appears, in comparison, fleeting and unreal. We may live most of our lives in the world of ordinary experience, but at moments, particularly when we are in the mountains, our usual preoccupations may seem inconsequential. The rough touch of rock on fingers when climbing, the quiet of twilight beneath high peaks, the cold and misery of being caught in a thunderstorm – all these may strike us as more concretely real than the concerns and occupations of our everyday lives. Most of us at some point have shared the sentiments of the author of Ecclesiastes, who wrote, "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."[13] The Hindu Upanishads express a similar dissatisfaction with the world of profane existence:

> From the unreal lead me to the real.
> From darkness lead me to light.
> From death lead me to immortality.[14]

Mountains can offer a vision of something pure and eternal, beyond the corruptions of time.

Just as traditional cultures frequently separate the sacred from the profane, so they cordon off certain mountains with rules and rituals. Only those of spiritual power and purity may venture up these mountains without fear of provoking the anger of the gods – or the spite of demons. In North America, for example, many Native Americans believe that only people with the proper ritual preparation may climb to the summits of sacred peaks without being struck down by spirits. In the Bible only Moses is regarded as holy enough to step onto the hallowed ground of Mount Sinai and ascend the mountain to converse with God.

Nevertheless, the sacred may erupt without warning into the profane world of material existence. We may be walking along a trail when something – a stone or a tree – catches our attention. As we glance toward it, a translucent beauty beyond anything we have imagined shines through it, giving it a heightened reality, and we feel ourselves in the presence of the sacred. The paradigm of such an experience occurs in the Biblical episode of the burning bush, which takes place, significantly, on a mountain. There Moses beholds a bush that burns, yet is not consumed, thereby revealing the presence of God. Likewise, our tree beside the trail takes on an unearthly glow, yet remains for all that a tree, a part of this world. The place where someone has such an experience often becomes a pilgrimage shrine sacred to others. Because of their awe-inspiring power, mountains are prime places for this kind of encounter with the sacred.

A beautiful example appears in Herzog's description of the striking change of perception he experienced near the summit of Annapurna:

> The snow, sprinkled over every rock and gleaming in the sun, was of a radiant beauty that touched me to the heart. I had never seen such complete transparency, and I was living in a world of crystal. Sounds were indistinct, the atmosphere like cotton wool.[15]

As an expression of ultimate power and reality, what we regard as sacred possesses ultimate value and meaning. It embodies whatever we cherish above everything else, whatever stirs our deepest feelings and awakens our highest aspirations. This will differ from person to person, culture to culture: for a Christian it may be selfless love, for a Buddhist complete enlightenment, for a Daoist harmony with the underlying way of nature. Many regard the sacred as the sheer embodiment of the beautiful and the sublime. Whatever it may be, the ultimate value expressed in the sacred provides meaning, direction, and purpose in life. It gives us a sense of place and inspires our greatest efforts. For many, mountains ultimately express or embody something of deeper reality or significance that gives meaning and vitality to their lives.

Because of their power to awaken an overwhelming sense of the sacred, mountains have come to be associated with the highest and most central values and aspirations of religions and cultures throughout the world. Mount Sinai occupies a special place as the awesome site where God appeared in cloud and thunder to give Moses the Torah, the law and teachings that form the core of the Jewish religion. The graceful cone of Mount Fuji represents for many a sublime symbol of the beauty and spirit of the Japanese nation. The remote peak of Mount Kailas, rising aloof above the Tibetan Plateau, directs the hearts and minds of millions in India and Tibet toward the realm of the highest deities and the utmost attainments of spiritual meditation. The Hopi and Navajo view the San Francisco Peaks of Arizona as a divine source of water and blessings on which their lives and communities depend. For many in the modern world, Mount Everest symbolizes the highest goal they may strive to attain, whether their pursuit be material or spiritual.

Like the sacred values they express, mountains revered by people and cultures around the world appear infinite in number and kind. They range from the highest peaks on earth to hills that barely rise above the surrounding landscape. They are regarded traditionally as places of revelation, centers of the universe, sources of life, pathways to heaven, abodes of the dead, temples of the gods, expressions of some ultimate reality or significance in its myriad manifestations. The following chapters explore the many diverse ways in which people have experienced the sacred on the sublime heights of our planet, near and far, high and low.

Sacred Mountains of the World
Denali (Mt. McKinley)
Mt. Saint Elias
NORTH AMERICA
ROCKY MTNS.
Black Hills
Adirondack Mtns.
Mt. Katahdin
Mt. Rainier
Devil's Tower
Bear Butte
Mt. Marcy
Mt. Shasta
Sierra Nevada
Hesperus
Blanca Peak
Appalachian Mtns.
San Francisco Peaks
Mt. Taylor
Clingmans Dome
Atlantic Ocean
Mauna Kea
Mauna Loa
Kilauea
Hawaii
Sierra Madre
Tlaloc
Iztaccíhuatl
Popocatépetl
Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta
Auyantepui
Cotacachi
Chimborazo
Huascarán
SOUTH AMERICA
Machu Picchu
Mt. Ausangate
Mt. Kaata
ANDES
Ampato
Llullaillaco
Pacific Ocean
Maungapohatu
Hikurangi
Mt. Tongariro
Aoraki/Mount Cook
New Zealand
Mt. Aconcagua
Towers of Paine
Fitz Roy

ASIA
EUROPE
AFRICA
AUSTRALIA
Croagh Patrick
Glastonbury Tor
Harz Mtns.
ALPS
Matterhorn
Mont Blanc
Pyrenees
Montserrat
Mt. Athos
Mt. Olympos
Mt. Parnassos
Gerizim
ATLAS Mt.
Mt. Sinai
Mt. Zion
Hira
Caucasus
Ararat
Damavand
Sulaiman-Too
Muztagh Ata
Tian Shan
Pamir Mtns.
Hindu Kush
H I M A L A Y A S
Annapurna & Machapuchare
Nanda Devi
Mt. Kailas
Mt. Everest &
Khumbila
Kangchenjunga
Altai Range
Burkhan Khaldun
Kunlun
Amnye Machen
Wutai Shan
Hua Shan
Tai Shan
Mt. Koya
Mt. Fuji
Omine
Pacific Ocean
Adam's Peak
Kinabalu
Ruwenzori Mtns.
Virunga Mtns.
Mt. Kenya
Ol Doinyo Lengai
Mt. Kilimanjaro
Semeru
Java
Bali
Gunung Agung
Uluru (Ayers Rock)
Indian Ocean

PART I

SACRED MOUNTAINS AROUND THE WORLD

ONE

THE HIMALAYAS

Abode of the Sacred

An enormous range 1,500 miles long, the Himalayas rise in the monsoon-drenched jungles north of Myanmar to sweep in a great arc of snow and ice northwest along the border of India and Tibet through Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal up to the dusty glaciers of the Karakoram on the remote desert frontier between Pakistan and China. From the plains of India, the mountains appear as luminous tracings on the far blue sky, wisps of light hinting at another world far above ours. As one approaches, they dwindle behind intervening hills to reappear in more substantial form in flashes of white, glimpsed now and then through the opening of a dark green valley. From the vantage point of a high ridge gained by an arduous climb, they emerge sharp and solid against the horizon, their glaciers glistening in the sun, too brilliant for eyes to bear. At twilight, after the colorful displays of sunset, their jagged snows soften to take on a strange lavender glow as they fade into the depths of night. No wonder that millions of devout Hindus and Buddhists regard them as the dwelling place of the gods and the pathway to heaven.[1]

As the loftiest mountains on earth, the Himalayas have come to embody humanity's highest ideals and aspirations. The sight of their sublime peaks, soaring high and clean above the dusty, congested plains of India, has for centuries inspired visions of transcendent splendor and spiritual liberation.

Invoking such visions, the *Puranas*, ancient works of Hindu mythology, have this to say of Himachal, or the Himalayas:

> In the space of a hundred ages of the gods, I could not describe to you the glories of Himachal . . . As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of humankind by the sight of Himachal.[2]

The physical history of the Himalayas has a dramatic quality that matches the mountains' spiritual grandeur. Millions of years ago, the summit of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, lay beneath the Tethys, an ancient sea that once separated Asia from the Indian subcontinent. As the two great land masses slowly moved together, they folded and thrust up the peaks of the Himalayas and the Plateau of Tibet. Fossils found in sedimentary rocks near the tops of the highest mountains attest to the submarine origins of the range. The fracturing of the earth's crust also led to injections of magma, forming here and there, as a result of glacial action, magnificent walls and peaks of granite. The youngest mountains on earth, the Himalayas have risen so recently, within the last few million years, that the watershed lies 100 miles north of their crest. As a consequence, pre-existing rivers have cut through the range, creating the deepest valleys in the world, such as the Kali Gandaki Valley between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri in central Nepal, nearly four miles deep.

The Himalayas form a line marking the collision of cultures as well as land masses. From the south and west have come peoples of Indian and Persian backgrounds; from the north and east, groups of Tibetan and Chinese origins. During the third millennium BCE, the Indigenous Dravidians of India built the great cities of the mysterious Indus Valley Civilization. Figurines found in the ruins of two of these cities, Mohenjodaro and Harappa in Pakistan, suggest that they worshipped a cross-legged god who evolved into Shiva, the present-day Hindu deity most closely associated with the Himalayas. Sometime later, perhaps around 1500 BCE, coming from the direction of Persia, a nomadic Indo-European people called the Aryans migrated to India through the passes of the Hindu Kush and interacted with the Dravidians. Out of the interaction of their two cultures rose the major ancient religions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The Rig Veda, a collection of hymns composed by the Aryans, contains what may be the earliest mention of the Himalayas, referred to as Himavat, or the "Snow Mountains."[3]

Around 500 BCE, drawing on pre-Hindu traditions and his own experience, Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of a kingdom at the foot of the Nepalese Himalayas, founded the religion of Buddhism. Known as the Buddha or "Awakened One," he taught the path to nirvana or enlightenment, the ultimate goal of freedom from suffering caused by attachments to illusory notions of the self. In the centuries that followed, Hinduism as we know it today arose with the emergence of sects devoted to the worship of two major deities – Vishnu the

Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. These two, along with Brahma the Creator, represented the three principal manifestations of the supreme deity who creates, sustains, and destroys the universe. Although Buddhists and Hindus shared similar goals of liberation or release from suffering, Hindu philosophy emphasized the realization of the *atman* or true self as the means of attaining that end. Followers of Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the related religion of Jainism, looked to the heights of the Himalayas as a favored abode of the gods and the ideal place to pursue their spiritual practices.

North of the Himalayas, at some indeterminate time, people with a language and culture related to Chinese moved into the valleys of southern Tibet. Many of their religious practices centered around the worship of mountains as warrior gods imbued with the power of kings. According to ancient Tibetan myth, the first ruler of Tibet was a god who descended from the sky on a magic rope woven of light. He landed on a peak of Yarlha Shampo, a sacred mountain at the head of the Yarlung Valley south of the Tsangpo River. Whatever their origins, the first historical kings of Tibet emerged from the mists of legend around the seventh century CE to establish the Yarlung Dynasty near this sacred peak. When Padma Sambhava, a legendary Indian sage and magician regarded as a second Buddha, introduced Buddhism into Tibet in the eighth century, he subjugated a number of mountain deities who opposed his efforts, and converted them into protectors of the new religion, roles they have retained to this day.[4]

Beginning around the twelfth century CE, in response to Muslim invasions of India, great numbers of Hindus sought refuge in the lower ranges of the Himalayas. There they encountered Indigenous tribes with shamanistic rituals focused on invoking spirits of mountains. Many of these tribes they converted to Hinduism, incorporating their beliefs and practices with local deities taking on Hindu names. In succeeding centuries immigrants from Tibet moved into the higher ranges of the Himalayas and spread Tibetan Buddhism throughout the area. As a result, the Himalayan region today is characterized by complex overlays of different peoples, cultures, and religious traditions.

The Himalayas are sacred for followers of five Asian religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and the indigenous Bon tradition of Tibet. They revere the mountains as places of power and inspiration where many of their most important sages and teachers have attained the heights of spiritual realization. According to Jain tradition, Rishabhanatha, the first of twenty-four saviors of the religion, achieved enlightenment on Mount Kailas, the most sacred peak in the Himalayan region. There, in the vicinity of the same mountain, Shenrab, the legendary founder of Bon, is said to have taught and meditated. Sikhs, followers of an Indian religion that developed following the interaction of Islam and Hinduism in the fifteenth century, revere Hemkund, a mountain lake near the source of the Ganges, as the place where Guru Gobind

Singh, the last of their ten principal teachers, practiced meditation in a previous life. The Himalayas abound with caves and shrines where Buddhist sages, such as the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, have meditated and attained enlightenment.

Hindus – by far the largest group with more than a billion adherents – revere the entire Himalayan range as the god Himalaya, father of Parvati, wife of Shiva, lord of the universe and master of meditation. King of the mountains, Himalaya lives high on a peak with his queen, the goddess Mena, in a palace ablaze with gold, attended by divine guardians, maidens, scent-eating creatures, and other magical beings. His name, composed of the words *hima* and *alaya*, means in the Sanskrit language of ancient India the "Abode of Snow." As a reservoir of frozen water, the body and home of the god Himalaya is the divine source of sacred rivers, such as the Ganges and Indus, that sustain life on the hot and dusty plains of northern India and Pakistan. The ancient poets and sages regarded the range as more than a realm of snow; they saw it as an earthly paradise, sparkling with streams and forests set beneath beautiful peaks. The *Mahabharata*, the great epic of Indian literature dating back to the fourth century BCE, describes the journey of one of its principal heroes, the prince Arjuna, up to the Himalayas:

> After he had crossed through the impassable jungle at the foot of the great mountain, Arjuna dwelled on the peak of the Himalaya in all his splendor. He saw blossoming trees there, which resounded with the sweet songs of birds, and streams full of whirlpools, the color of blue beryl, resonant with geese and ducks, ringing with the cries of cranes, echoing with the calls of the cuckoo, and loud with curlews and peacocks. When that great warrior Arjuna saw those streams with their lovely woods, filled with sacred, cool, and pure water, he became joyous of spirit.[5]

MOUNT EVEREST AND KHUMBILA

The Himalayas hold hundreds of sacred mountains, a number of which stand out above the rest. The highest peak, and the one that for outsiders represents the range as a whole, is Mount Everest. As the loftiest point on earth, rising to 29,032 feet above sea level, it has acquired a semi-sacred status in the eyes of the modern, secular world. The mountain itself lies in the eastern Himalayas, nearly hidden behind a screen of lesser peaks lining the border between Nepal and Tibet. From the plains of India and southern Nepal, it can scarcely be distinguished from lower peaks in front of it that either conceal it completely or appear to rise to greater heights. Only from the north, from the valley of Rongbuk in Tibet, does Everest reveal itself in solitary splendor as an unmatched pyramid of rock and ice. Great ridges of snow sweep smoothly up to converge in a graceful tip that in the last glow of twilight seems to hover

among the stars. From the windswept ruins of Rongbuk Monastery, one of the highest monasteries in the world, Everest appears framed between rocky walls that guide the eye straight to the mountain itself. No other snow peaks soar up to distract the mind from its contemplation of the highest point on earth.

Until 1852 the British knew Mount Everest only as Peak XV on the Survey of India. Then a clerk computed its height from trigonometric readings and realized, to his amazement, that he had discovered the highest mountain in the world – with a piece of paper and a pen. The British surveyor general of India named the peak for his predecessor, Sir George Everest. Since then, Mount Everest has come to be associated in the West with the highest pinnacles of achievement, and those who have climbed it, beginning with Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953, have acquired a special standing that sets them apart in the eyes of the world.

When I first visited the ruins of Rongbuk in 1983, the monks and nuns restoring the monastery told me of a sacred cave up the valley where Padma Sambhava had meditated beneath Everest. I found the spot, removed a slab of rock, and lowered myself into the end of a short tunnel that led to an image of the Buddhist sage lit by the flickering glow of a butter lamp. An oily smell mixed with a sweet trace of incense thickened the thin air at 17,000 feet, making it difficult to breathe. According to a story related by one of the monks, long ago some yogis came up from India to perform austerities at the foot of Everest but had to leave out of exhaustion because Padma Sambhava had made the ground so holy they couldn't sit down to rest or meditate. The monk added that the monastery of Rongbuk was named for the sacred cave.

The Tibetans and the Sherpas, a people of Tibetan origin and culture who live just south of the mountain, know Everest by another, more significant, name – Chomolungma or Jomolangma. Reflecting a tendency to assume that the local people must revere the highest peak on earth as the abode of a supremely important deity, modern writers and mountaineers impose their values on the mountain and commonly mistranslate this name as "Goddess Mother of the World" or "Goddess Mother of the Universe." If Everest were the abode of so major a deity, Sherpas such as Tenzing Norgay, who made the first ascent with Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953, would not have climbed the mountain: as devout Buddhists they would have regarded its summit too sacred to desecrate.

Everest is, in fact, a sacred peak, but a relatively minor one. Its Tibetan name – Chomolungma or, more properly, Jomolangma – comes from the name of the goddess believed to dwell there: Jomo Miyolangsangma, where Jomo means "Lady or Goddess." The Tibetan language is monosyllabic, where almost every syllable can stand alone as a word; for brevity Tibetans commonly shorten long names to a few syllables. Accordingly, Jomo Miyolangsangma contracts to Jomolangma. The full name of the mountain would then mean the "Goddess

Miyolangsangma." When I spoke to the Tengboche Rinpoche, Abbot of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery on the south side of Everest, he confirmed this meaning of Jomolangma or Chomolungma.[6]

Jomo Miyolangsangma belongs to a group of relatively minor Tibetan goddesses known as the Five Sisters of Long Life, said to dwell on various Himalayan peaks along the southern border of Tibet. The leader and most important goddess of the sisters, Tashi Tseringma, resides on Gauri Shankar, a prominent peak west of Everest, and on Chomolhari, the major sacred mountain of western Bhutan. Murals at the monasteries of Rongbuk and Tengboche on the north and south sides of Mount Everest portray Jomo Miyolangsangma as a golden goddess riding a tiger and holding a mongoose spitting jewels along with a bowl of roasted barley flour, indicating that she bestows wealth and food as well as long life. The tiger she rides symbolizes her supernatural power. Depending on variations in spelling, her name means either the "Unmovable Goddess Benefactress of Good Bulls" or "Unmovable Goddess of the Good Mind."[7]

Tibetan Buddhism divides its deities into two major categories – the mundane and the transcendent. Tibetans and Sherpas appeal to the lower mundane gods, such as Jomo Miyolangsangma, for worldly benefits such as food, wealth, and long life. For the higher, spiritual aims of Tibetan Buddhism – in particular, the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings – they turn to the higher category of transcendent deities, such as Demchog, the One of Supreme Bliss, who dwells on Mount Kailas, the most sacred mountain in the world for Tibetan Buddhists and for followers of other Asian religions.

Except for the Sherpas who live near its foot, the people of Nepal took little notice of Everest until they learned from the British of its status as the highest mountain on earth. In response to outside interest, for the peak had no sacred significance for most Nepalis, government officials in the twentieth century adopted a new Nepali name specially formulated for it: Sagarmatha. The present-day national park on the Nepal side of the mountain bears this name – Sagarmatha National Park. In Nepali *Sagarmatha* means literally the "Head of the Sky" or the "One whose Forehead Reaches up to the Sky," indicating its unmatched height. The words used to make up Sagarmatha, *sagar* and *matha*, however, are not the common Nepali words for "head" and "sky." They come from the ancient sacred language of Sanskrit, which only pundits and religiously educated Nepalis would use in conversation. For this reason, I suspect that Baburam Acharya, the noted Nepali historian and scholar credited with formulating the name, was also thinking of a Sanskrit term very close to it – *Sagaramanthana* or the "Churning of the Ocean."

The Churning of the Ocean refers to a well-known Hindu myth in which the gods and anti-gods joined forces and churned the ocean to extract the nectar of immortality. According to this account, depicted in many works of

Indian art, they used a mythical mountain named Mandara as the churning stick. In the course of spinning the peak, they created many other things, such as butter, the horse of the sun, and a wish-fulfilling tree. The secondary Sanskrit associations of Sagarmatha would equate Mount Everest with this cosmic mountain of creation.[8]

The Sherpas themselves have traditionally paid more attention to Khumbila, a jagged rock peak 18,901 feet high – about 10,000 feet lower than Mount Everest. Unlike its higher neighbor, which rises on the periphery of their homeland, Khumbila stands at the center of the Sherpa valleys of Khumbu. The three principal villages of Khumjung, Kunde, and Namche Bazaar rest on its flanks. Because of its central location, the people who dwell there regard the mountain as the abode of the most important deity of Khumbu, the one who watches over their land and protects them from the forces of evil. Paintings by local artists show Sherpas praying and making offerings to this deity, whose name Khumbu'i yul lha means the "Country God of Khumbu." Depicted as a warrior king riding a horse, Khumbu'i yul lha reigns supreme over the numerous gods and spirits associated with mountains and other sacred features of Khumbu, many of which are the abodes of relatives or officials in his court. According to tradition, when the Sherpas migrated from eastern Tibet 500 years ago to settle in the valleys around Khumbila, they found the deity of the sacred mountain had been vanquished and transformed into a protector of Buddhism centuries before by Padma Sambhava, the Indian sage who introduced the Buddhist religion into Tibet and neighboring areas of the Himalayas.

Although many Sherpas make their living by participating in mountaineering expeditions to Everest, they would never dream of attempting Khumbila, which they regard as too sacred to be desecrated by climbers. Such an attempt would incur the wrath of the god and put their country in jeopardy. And, indeed, Western climbers who tried to climb the mountain died in an avalanche. Some Sherpas believe that if they transgress or offend Khumbu'i yul lha, even in minor ways, he will send down yetis or abominable snowmen to kill their yaks, destroy their crops, or otherwise punish them.[9]

Khumbila is typical of many Buddhist peaks in the Himalayas and Tibet that are well known and sacred only to the people who live near them. We find them scattered throughout the range as seats of local deities who watch over the land and villages around them. As protectors and providers of food and water, they play roles of vital importance in the lives of the people who depend upon them for the satisfaction of their spiritual and material needs. Mount Everest, in contrast, is known throughout the world, but has little religious significance for those who farm and graze the lands beneath its slopes. Its importance as a sacred peak derives primarily from its supreme height, which has made its summit a symbol of transcendent attainment for foreigners who dwell far from the mountain itself.

MOUNT KAILAS

One peak in the Himalayan region stands out above all others as the ultimate sacred mountain for around a billion people in Asia – followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and the indigenous Tibetan religion of Bon. Hidden behind the main range of the Himalayas at a high point of the Tibetan Plateau northwest of Nepal, Mount Kailas rises in isolated splendor near the sources of four major rivers of the Indian subcontinent – the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Sutlej, and the Karnali. Hindus also regard it as the place where the divine form of the Ganges, the holiest river of all, cascading from heaven, first touches the earth to course invisibly through the locks of Shiva's hair before spewing forth from a glacier 140 miles to the west. Not far from the foot of the peak itself, at nearly 15,000 feet above sea level, reflecting the light of its snows, repose the calm blue waters of the most sacred lake of Hindu religion and mythology – the holy Manasarovar, "Ocean of the Mind." Before the modern construction of roads, the hardiest of Hindu pilgrims used to aspire to take the long and dangerous journey on foot over high passes to bathe in its icy waters and cleanse their minds of the sins that threatened to condemn them to the suffering of rebirth. Buddhists know it as Anavatapta, the "Unheated One," a lake that the historical Buddha is said to have magically visited when he lived and taught in India during the fifth century BCE.

Figure 1 Mount Kailas. Hindus view the gulley cutting down the middle of the south face as the stairway to heaven of Shiva on the summit, while Buddhists regard it as a groove gouged out by the falling Bonpo priest and his drum, and Bonpos as part of a swastika engraved on the sacred mountain. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

At only 21,778 feet Kailas is thousands of feet lower than Everest and many other Himalayan peaks. Its extraordinary setting and appearance, however, more than make up for its modest height. Situated in a high desert mostly beyond reach of the monsoon, the peak rises in a bright and flawless sky, alone above a golden plain, unchallenged by ranges of softly rounded hills that flank it on either side. Unlike Everest, which merges with other mountains to vanish behind them, Kailas retains its grandeur when viewed from a distance. More than any other peak in the Himalayas, it opens the mind to the cosmos around it, evoking a sense of infinite space that makes one aware of a vaster universe encompassing the limited world of ordinary experience. Placed on a pedestal of striated rock, its dome of snow shining white in the sun, Kailas looks more like a piece of sculpture fashioned by the hands of the gods than a mountain created by the forces of nature. Indeed, Tibetans often compare the peak to the pagoda palace of a deity or the reliquary of a saint, and they treat it as such, prostrating themselves before it. It has also served as an inspiration for numerous Hindu temples and shrines on the distant plains of India. The mere sight of the peak has a powerful effect, bringing tears to the eyes of many who behold it, leaving them convinced that they have glimpsed the abode of the gods.

Hindus view Mount Kailas as the dwelling place of the great god Shiva and his wife, the beautiful goddess Parvati. There, as the supreme yogi, naked and smeared with ashes, his matted hair coiled on top of his head, he sits on a tiger skin, steeped in the indescribable bliss of meditation. From his position of aloof splendor on the summit of Kailas, his third eye blazing with supernatural power and awareness, the Lord of the Mountain calmly surveys the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and tragedies, the entire play of illusion that makes up life in the world below. As one of the three forms of the supreme deity – Brahma and Vishnu being the other two – Shiva is the god of destruction and lord of the dance. The power of his meditation destroys the illusions that bind people to the painful cycle of death and rebirth. When he rises to dance, he takes on the functions of Brahma and Vishnu and creates and preserves the universe itself.

According to a well-known Hindu myth, Shiva was once meditating in the mountains near Kailas. The lesser gods learned that only a son born of his powerful semen could defeat the demons, who were oppressing the earth. They therefore sent Parvati, the daughter of the mountain god Himalaya, to seduce the celibate Shiva. She spent thousands of years practicing austerities and meditating in his presence until she caught his attention. At that point Kama, the god of love, shot one of his flowered arrows at Shiva, who seeing him at the last minute burned him to ashes with a glance of his flaming eye. But it was too late: the arrow hit its mark and Shiva fell in love with Parvati. They were married in a magnificent ceremony in the mountain palace of the god Himalaya and then went to dwell on Kailas, where they made love and had a supernatural

son, Karttikeya, who grew up to defeat the demons and liberate the world from evil.[10]

Only in recent times, however, have Hindus come to view the physical mountain in Tibet as the sacred abode of Shiva and a major place of pilgrimage. The great epics of Indian literature, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, refer to the peak as the luxurious residence of Kubera, the god of wealth who lives in the far north. *The Cloud Messenger*, a poem composed in the fifth century by the Sanskrit poet and dramatist Kalidasa, the Indian equivalent of Shakespeare, relates the story of a lovelorn *yaksha*, a supernatural being of Hindu mythology, banished to southern India from his home in Alaka, the city of Kubera on the summit of Kailas. Consumed with longing for his lover back on the sacred mountain, he sends her a message with a passing cloud that he spies drifting north toward the Himalayas. In his instructions to this unusual messenger, he compares the heavenly qualities of the city to those of the cloud itself:

> Its mansions are your equals – they have for your lightning
> the flash of dazzling women, for your rainbow
> arrays of paintings, for your deep and soothing thunder
> drums beating for dance and song, for your core
> of waters floors inset with gems, and roofs
> that graze the sky for your loftiness.

Over time Kailas gradually shifted from being the luxurious home of the god of wealth to becoming the favored abode of Shiva, but even then, for a long time, it was more a mythical place rather than an actual mountain to which one could go on pilgrimage.[11]

The ancient Indian religion of Jainism identifies Mount Kailas with Astapada, the mountain where millions of years ago the first Jain savior and spiritual teacher attained final liberation at death. The gods are said to have cremated him there, making the sacred mountain the original cremation ground. In Jain tradition, there are twenty-four such saviors, known as *Tirthankaras*, who like Buddhas in Buddhism come in succeeding eras to revitalize the faded teachings of their religion. The *Tirthankara* of our era, Mahavira, lived around the time of the historical Buddha in the fifth century BCE. The Sanskrit word *tirtha* in their titles means "ford," reflecting the roles of these saviors in helping people cross over to the far shore of nirvana. The sites where according to tradition each *Tirthankara* attained final liberation have become major pilgrimage places dedicated to the ultimate goal of the Jain religion. Jains regard Kailas as one of foremost of these places of pilgrimage. The circumambulation of Kailas assures them of the highest spiritual rewards.[12]

Kailas also has great significance for the people of Tibet and figures prominently in one of the most beautiful and widely read works of Tibetan literature – *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Like Hindus of India, Tibetans regard

Kailas as the ultimate sacred mountain, the one that they dream of beholding at least once in their lifetimes. Situated in the high and windswept reaches of western Tibet, it lies far from the centers of population in the central and eastern parts of the country. Tibetans call Kailas by two different names: Tise and Kang Rinpoche, the "Precious One of Glacial Snow." The second name indicates the high esteem in which they hold it: *Rinpoche* is the title reserved for the very highest lamas or Buddhist priests, such as the Dalai Lama, the exiled ruler of Tibet, whom they view as incarnations of spiritual beings called Bodhisattvas.

Followers of the indigenous Tibetan religion of Bon regard Mount Kailas as the center of the world and the heart of their original homeland, the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zhung. According to the Bon origin myth, Tonpa Shenrab, the legendary founder of the religion, descended from the sky to earth via a nine-storied swastika mountain, which Bonpos or followers of Bon identify with Mount Kailas. Tonpa Shenrab is said to have taught three times on the mountain. Tise or Kailash is also said to be the abode of a number of deities, ranging from protective mountain gods to deities associated with meditation practices leading to enlightenment in the Bon tradition. Just going on a pilgrimage to the sacred mountain is supposed to result in enlightenment in three lifetimes. Bonpos see imprinted in natural formations on the south face of Kailas the shape of a swastika, the symbol of their religion. They circumambulate the mountain like Buddhists and Hindus, but they do so in the opposite, counterclockwise direction. Their texts describe Kailas as having the form of a crystal *stupa* or *chorten*, a religious monument holding the relics of a holy person and symbolizing the elements that make up the cosmos.[13]

Kailas is noted in Tibetan history and literature as the scene of a famous mountain climbing contest between Tibet's most beloved yogi, Milarepa, and Naro Bhun Chon, a Bon priest. Milarepa, who roamed the high mountains in the twelfth century clad only in a cotton shirt and the warmth of his meditation, came to pay homage to Kailas and the sacred lake near its foot. When he arrived with his disciples, Naro Bhun Chon informed him that the area was the special preserve of the Bon religion and that Milarepa would have to take up its practices if he wished to stay. He refused, and a series of contests of supernatural power ensued to determine whose teachings would prevail – those of the Buddha, which had been introduced from India a few centuries before, or those of Tonpa Shenrab, the great teacher who had founded Bon in the vicinity of Kailas thousands of years earlier. After a succession of embarrassing losses in which he refused to concede defeat, Naro challenged Milarepa to a race that would settle the issue once and for all: the first to reach the summit of Kailas on the fifteenth day of the month would be acknowledged the spiritual master of the mountain and its surrounding area.

While Milarepa relaxed and enjoyed the beautiful scenery, Naro went into spiritual training, strenuously praying to his deity for the power needed to make the ascent. On the appointed day, early in the morning, the Bon priest put on a green cloak and took off flying on his shaman's drum toward the summit of Kailas. Milarepa was still asleep. His anxious disciples woke him up to tell him that Naro had reached the waist of the mountain. Quite unconcerned, Milarepa made a gesture with his hand, and the Bon priest found himself circling around the peak, unable to go higher. Then, putting on a cloak for wings, Milarepa snapped his finger and with the first light of the sun flew in a second to the summit of Kailas – certainly the most elegant ascent in the history of mountaineering, and one of the earliest ever recorded.

When poor Naro looked up to see Milarepa sitting at ease on top of the mountain, he fell off in amazement, and his drum tumbled down the south face of Kailas, leaving a series of indentations that look like a line of steps ascending the peak. Whereas Tibetan Buddhists attribute these indentations to the fall of the Bon priest, Hindus view them as a stairway leading up to the heaven of Shiva on the summit itself and followers of Bon see them as part of a swastika imprinted on the face of Kailas. Neither they nor any Tibetans, however, would ever contemplate trying to climb this, the most sacred of mountains. Completely humbled, Naro finally acknowledged defeat, and Milarepa magnanimously allowed him to stay on a nearby peak where he might practice his religion and continue to gaze on Kailas, now indisputably Buddhist. Milarepa's feelings about the mountain are lyrically expressed in the words of one of his many songs of spiritual accomplishment:

> The prophecy of Buddha says most truly,
> That this snow mountain is the navel of the world,
> A place where the snow leopards dance.
> The mountain top, the crystal-like pagoda,
> Is the white and glistening palace of Demchog.
> . . . . . .
> This is the great place of accomplished yogis;
> Here one attains transcendent accomplishments.
> There is no place more wonderful than this,
> There is no place more marvelous than here.[14]

In his song Milarepa refers to the palace of Demchog, the principal Buddhist deity of the sacred mountain. Of awesome appearance, blue like the sky, draped with garlands of skulls and embracing his female consort, Demchog, the "One of Supreme Bliss," dances in the ecstatic realization of ultimate reality on the summit of Kailas. At a deep, inner level, their passionate embrace expresses the bliss arising from the union of the spiritual forces of masculine compassion and feminine wisdom awakened on the way to the supreme goal of

Tibetan Buddhism – the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Lay people and lamas alike travel for weeks and even months to the sacred mountain to gather religious merit and experience a moment of revelation that may show them the way to transcend the passions and illusions of this world. They view Kailas with the invisible pagoda palace of Demchog on its summit as the center of a *mandala* or sacred circle that represents the divine space of the deity where they may come to know the power and wisdom that will set them free from the bondage of suffering. In the practice of meditation, Tibetan yogis will visualize and identify themselves with Demchog and their surroundings with his encircling realm in order to awaken to their own true nature and transform their experience of the world from a profane place of illusion into the sacred realm of ultimate reality.[15]

The pattern of such a *mandala* appears frequently in works of Tibetan art depicting the universe as a circle of mountains, oceans, and continents arrayed around a mythical mountain at the very center, shooting up from the depths of hell through the level of the earth to the heights of heaven. This mountain, called Meru by Hindus and Sumeru by Buddhists, plays a pivotal role in Hinduism and Buddhism as a divine axis, linking together the three levels of the cosmos. According to Hindu mythology, Brahma, the supreme deity in the form of the creator, lives on its summit, surrounded by lesser deities; in the Buddhist version, the king of the gods, Indra, the equivalent of Zeus in Greek mythology, resides in a glorious palace on its peak, more than 80,000 miles above the earth. Our world appears in the latter version as a triangular continent shaped like India, situated in an ocean to the south of Meru, which rises far to the north, looming over seven rings of golden mountains, so high that the sun and moon must circle around its flanks.[16]

Meru and Kailas appear as separate mountains in early texts of Buddhist and Hindu mythology, but later tradition has tended to bring them together and identify them as one and the same. Today many Indians and Tibetans view Kailas as the place where the invisible form of Meru breaks through to appear in the physical plane of existence. A pilgrimage to the mountain, therefore, represents for them a journey to the very center of the universe – the cosmic point where everything begins and ends, the divine source of all that exists and has significance. In circling the peak and paying homage to a vision of Shiva or Demchog on its shining summit, they make contact with a center deep within themselves that links them to the supreme reality underlying and infusing the cosmos itself.

For many people of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, the journey to Kailas is, in fact, the ultimate pilgrimage, both in terms of the sanctity of its goal and the difficulty of the way. In the past pilgrims walking from the plains of India or the hills of Nepal had first to surmount the formidable ice barrier of the Himalayas, crossing passes more than 16,000 feet high, often clad in sandals and cotton

clothes. After a difficult ascent through eerie gorges twisting between towering mountains lost in mist, they emerged from the monsoon clouds to behold a brilliant landscape of yellow, red, and purple plains stretching off toward distant peaks, shining beneath an intense blue sky. Pilgrims from central and eastern Tibet did not have to contend with the steep ramparts of the Himalayas, but they did have to travel for months by horseback – and until recently weeks by motor vehicle – across the Tibetan Plateau.

The routes of the two converge at the shores of Lake Manasarovar, where Hindus strip for a ritual immersion in its clear but icy waters. The circumambulation of the holy mountain takes one to three days, with frequent stops to recite prayers and perform rituals to the gods. The high point of the pilgrimage comes at the Drolma La, a pass on the northeast side of Kailas at nearly 19,000 feet, festooned with prayer flags, where Tibetans leave part of themselves – a lock of hair or an old tooth – relinquishing attachment to self for the sake of benefitting everyone else. On the near side of the pass, a narrow crevice in the rocks through which Tibetan pilgrims must squeeze their bodies separates sinners destined for hell from those who will attain heaven – or the higher goal of nirvana.[17]

Those in the past who managed to reach Kailas and complete the circuit of the sacred mountain after an arduous journey came back with a sublime vision of another, sacred realm of existence and a renewed determination to strive for the highest goals of spiritual accomplishment. Lama Anagarika Govinda, a European who became a Tibetan lama and made the pilgrimage to Kailas in 1948, had this to say of his fellow pilgrims: "They return to their country with shining eyes, enriched by an experience which all through their life will be a source of strength and inspiration, because they have been face to face with the Eternal, they have seen the Land of the Gods."[18]

Lama Govinda was one of the very few Western travelers to reach Mount Kailas before the area around the mountain was officially opened to Westerners in 1984. The first Europeans to see the peak, two Jesuit missionaries named Ippolito Desideri and Manuel Freyre who passed by it on a journey from Kashmir to Lhasa in 1715, did not think much of it: "Close by is a mountain of excessive height and great circumference, always enveloped in cloud, covered with snow and ice, and most horrible, barren, steep and bitterly cold." The small group of explorers, military men, sportsmen, and other travelers who followed them had a very different impression of the mountain, and some of them even fell under its spell. Captain C. G. Rawling, a member of a British military expedition that invaded Tibet in 1903, had this to say of Kailas:

> [I]t is indeed difficult to place before the mental vision a true picture of this most beautiful mountain. In shape it resembles a vast cathedral, the

> roof of which, rising to a ridge in the center, is otherwise regular in outline and covered with eternal snow.[19]

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Westerners who did not have the advantage of travelling in official capacities had to sneak into Tibet to see the sacred peak. Most of them wore the same disguise, which they each prided themselves on so originally choosing: that of a deaf and dumb Indian pilgrim to more easily pass inspection. One of these "pilgrims" was an Austrian geologist and mountaineer named Herbert Tichy who went to India in 1936 to do research, but with the primary intention of going to Kailas. He succeeded in reaching his goal, but almost blew his disguise by taking a picture at the wrong moment. On his return to India, he received a letter from the governor of the Punjab, congratulating him as a fellow pilgrim to Kailas and regretfully informing him that he would be arrested in a few days for illegally crossing the Tibetan border. Tichy took the kind hint and immediately left for Europe.[20]

I first went to the sacred mountain in 1988, not long after the Chinese opened it to foreigners. Late in the afternoon three of us climbed up a ridge for a view of the south face with its staircase leading to heaven. Polished to a smooth finish by wind and sun, the white dome of Kailas gleamed against the sky, amazingly pure in the simplicity of its form. The wind came up, ripping at our faces, and my companions decided to go down. It was autumn and very cold. I stayed alone to watch the mountain turn orange and red in the sunset. As shadows deepened behind the peak, I began to fear that I had lingered too long. But something kept me there to see the last ray of the sun flare gold on the summit. Then, no longer anxious, but strangely excited, I started down in the twilight, suspended in the sky over the darkening plain of Barkha with the waters of Lake Manasarovar and the snows of the Himalayas glimmering blue in the distance. I felt as I had twenty years before when I first went to Nepal and stayed alone, high on a ridge, to watch Mount Everest fade in the sunset – open and free. Whistling a song, I danced down the slopes of the mountain, filled with a wild feeling of laughter and joy.

The next morning, as we were about to start the circumambulation, a member of our party woke up with symptoms of severe mountain sickness, forcing us to change plans and get her down to lower altitude in Nepal. Three years later, I was able to return and complete the circumambulation. On that journey, after a week of driving along faint ruts across the Tibetan Plateau, we came over the last pass to behold as our first view of Kailas an auspicious sight: four parallel bands of clouds floating over the summit. Buddhist murals portray the same number of parallel clouds over the summit of Mount Sumeru, the cosmic axis whose physical manifestation Kailas represents, symbolizing four stages of trance in meditation. This seemed especially significant as I gazed at the clouds over the sacred mountain: at the end of his life, according to religious

texts, the Buddha ascended through nine levels of trance then came back down to the first level and ascended to the fourth and from there entered final nirvana.

Our circumambulation started at Tarboche, where Tibetans had erected a tall pole for a festival celebrating the birthday of the Buddha. We passed through an unusual two-legged chorten serving as a gateway to the sacred region beyond. A gradual valley took us past small rocks with shapes regarded by Tibetans as the saddle and horseshoes of various deities and an indentation identified as the footprint of the Buddha himself. Looking up, I could see a large rock formation high on the mountain wall with the profile of a face that Hindus revere as the monkey god Hanuman gazing up at Shiva on the summit of Kailas, dazzlingly white in the noonday sun.

We passed a couple of Tibetan pilgrims making full-length body prostrations all the way around the mountain, unfazed by the streams, boulders, and snow fields they would cross in the three weeks it would take them. They raised their hands in a prayer gesture over their heads, stretched out face-down on the ground, brought their feet up to their hands, stood up, and repeated the process, accumulating vast amounts of religious merit from their extra efforts. I had expected to see many other pilgrims walking around the mountain, but

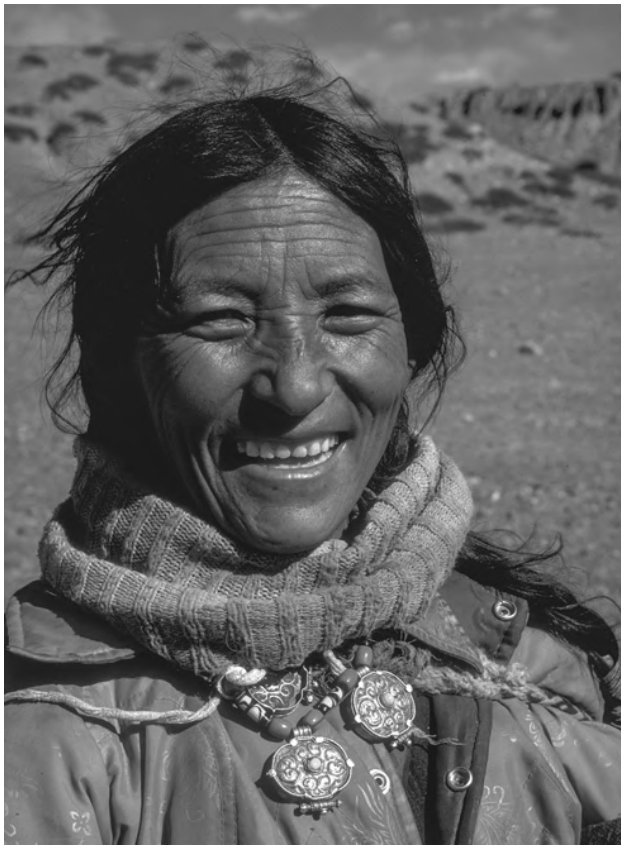


Figure 2 A Tibetan pilgrim expresses her joy at having just completed the circumambulation of Mount Kailas. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

we saw hardly any the first day. Where were they? We camped that night beneath the austere north face of Kailas, and early the next morning, right around dawn, I got my answer: crowds of Tibetan pilgrims, including children and grandparents, came rushing by. They had started in the night and would complete the entire thirty-mile circuit in just one day – going from 15,000 feet to over 18,000 feet above sea level. The same route would take us Westerners, unacclimatized to the altitude, nearly three days, huffing and puffing around the mountain.

After going on dangerous treks and hiking the length of the Himalayas, a friend of mine, Hugh Swift, died in a freak accident near his home in Berkeley, keeling over and hitting his head on the sidewalk. His parents gave me some of his ashes to take back to Kailas, his favorite place in the world. It felt strange carrying what remained of Hugh across Tibet in a little brocade bag in my backpack. When we reached the Drolma La, the high point of the circumambulation at 18,471 feet, I scattered his ashes in the icy wind, watching greyish white tendrils vanish in the air and merge with the snows of the sacred mountain.

In the years since I did the circumambulation in 1991, growing numbers of Indian pilgrims have been going to Kailas by new routes – a wealthy few flying by helicopter directly to the Nepal–Tibet border close to the sacred mountain, many more taking a longer route, transported quickly across the Tibetan Plateau in large busloads on a new road paved over the faded ruts that had taken us a week to negotiate in four-wheel drive vehicles. Modern hotels, restaurants, and supermarkets have mushroomed at the start of the circumambulation, while refuse has piled up along the traditional pilgrimage paths going to and around the mountain itself, imperiling the cultural and natural integrity of the area. Partly to address this problem and secure greater protection for what they called the Kailash Sacred Landscape, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an intergovernmental organization of scientists from all the Himalayan countries, asked me to guide them through the process of getting the relevant nations to nominate Mount Kailas and the pilgrimage routes leading to it over the Himalayas from India and Nepal as a World Heritage site. As a condition of designation, World Heritage sites must have Outstanding Universal Value – defined by UNESCO as "cultural and/or natural significance that is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity." In order be inscribed as a World Heritage site, Kailas and its pilgrimage routes would have to strengthen protections and put in place management plans and conservation measures specifically designed to safeguard the outstanding cultural and natural features that make it sacred for around a billion people, followers of at least five religious traditions.

On first glance it would seem much simpler to have China nominate just the part of the Kailash Sacred Landscape containing the most important sacred features – Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. Why complicate matters by expanding the nominated area to involve the governments of India and Nepal in the process? The answer lies in UNESCO's quota system, which limits a country to one nomination per year. China has such a long backlog of proposed World Heritage sites that Kailas and Manasarovar would be lucky to get nominated in fifty years. On the other hand, if the nomination included India and Nepal, it could go on the quota of just one of the three countries. Nepal has made very few nominations, and India, where the sacred mountain and lake have great importance for much of the population, could move the proposed site to the head of its list. In addition to speeding up the process immeasurably, working together on a transboundary nomination could also promote cooperation and peace among the three countries. As a result of our meetings with them, officials from India, China, and Nepal expressed great interest in the project, but as of 2021 border disputes and go-it-alone tendencies had held up further progress on the nomination. Nevertheless, the idea was firmly in place, and hopes for the future remained.[21]

NANDA DEVI

In addition to the paradise she shares with Shiva on Kailas, Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya, has her abode on a number of other mountains, where she appears in various forms. As Nanda Devi, the "Goddess of Bliss," she dwells in beauty on the lovely peak of that name in the Himalayas northeast of Delhi. The highest mountain in India outside the principality of Sikkim, Nanda Devi soars in alluring curves of rock and ice to culminate in a delicate summit, poised at 25,643 feet, above a ring of snow peaks that form a sanctuary protecting the goddess from all but her most determined suitors. The names of these peaks reflect their relationship to the deity they serve: *Nanda Ghunti*, "Nanda's Veil"; *Nanda Kot*, "Nanda's Fortress"; *Nanda Khat*, "Nanda's Bed." The only break in their otherwise impregnable wall of rock and snow is the terrifying gorge of the Rishi Ganga, one of the sources of the sacred Ganges, named after seven sages of Hindu mythology who fled the oppression of demons to seek refuge with the goddess before departing this world to become enshrined as seven stars in the constellation of Ursa Major. The few mountaineers who manage to penetrate the gorge, inching their way along the sides of sheer cliffs that plunge thousands of feet into the river roaring below, find themselves in a paradise of gentle meadows filled with flowers at the foot of the sacred peak, which stands like a temple in the middle of the sanctuary itself.[22]

Nanda Devi lies in the state of Uttarakhand, the principal area of pilgrimage in the Indian Himalayas. This region of sacred peaks and rivers ranks second

only to Kailas and Manasarovar in the degree of its sanctity for Hindus. Closer to the lowlands and more accessible, it is visited by many more pilgrims, who come by the tens of thousands to bathe at Gaumukh, the glacial source of the Ganges, and to worship at Kedarnath and Badrinath, lofty temples of Shiva and Vishnu sequestered in narrow valleys beneath the icy thrones of the gods themselves. One finely chiseled peak to which they pay reverence, Shivling, 21,467 feet high, they regard as the divine phallus of Shiva himself, a magnificent symbol of the god's creative power. Women in sedan chairs, old men with canes, babies in baskets, Hindus from all parts of India, many of them unprepared for the cold and wind of high altitude, flock along the network of pilgrimage routes linking the holy shrines. The region is also the favorite haunt of holy men and wandering yogis, who come to follow the example of Shiva and meditate in the sharp clear air of the heights, within sight of the peaks that lead to heaven and the goal they seek.

As the goddess who resides on the highest mountain in the area, Nanda Devi has many shrines and temples dedicated to her, including a major temple with her image in the hill station of Almora. Although primarily a benevolent deity, Nanda can take on the form of Durga, the wrathful goddess who absorbed into herself the power of all the gods, including Vishnu and Shiva, in order to slay a buffalo demon who was threatening the world. Villagers accordingly treat her with great respect and sacrifice goats and buffalo to her on certain festivals or whenever they feel they may have offended her. One such festival involves a strenuous pilgrimage of three weeks over a 17,000-foot pass to snowfields not far from Nanda Devi, beneath the summit of Trisul, a spectacular peak that some view as the trident of Shiva, others as the weapon of Nanda herself. Once every twelve years thousands of devotees, many of them barefoot, accompany a palanquin with an image of the goddess, taking her home to the mountain bearing her name. A ram with four horns, adorned with clothes and ornaments meant for Nanda Devi, leads the party to the shrine at the end of the pilgrimage and then, its task complete, wanders off to vanish into the eternal snows.

One such pilgrimage of the past ended in disaster. According to a legend prevalent in the area, a prince fell in love with a beautiful princess and they consummated their marriage without performing the proper ceremonies. The goddess was offended, and evil times fell on the prince's kingdom after he became king. To placate Nanda Devi the people went forth in pomp on a mass pilgrimage to her shrine high in the snows beneath Trisul. The king, however, did not take such practices seriously and brought along dancing girls for entertainment. This additional transgression compounded the original offense, and the goddess destroyed the party with avalanches of snow. Whether or not it happened that way, in 1954 hundreds of corpses, some mummified, some reduced to skeletons, were found in the rocky moraine of Rup Kund, a glacial lake just short of the shrine to Nanda Devi. Carbon dating showed the grisly

find to be more than 600 years old, in all likelihood the remains of a pilgrimage party that perished in either a blizzard or an enormous avalanche.[23]

According to ancient Hindu mythology, a flood once covered the entire world. As in the Biblical story of Noah, a sage named Manu was warned of the impending disaster and built himself a boat in which he survived. Vishnu, the Preserver, incarnated himself as a fish and towed the craft to safety on the summit of a mountain peak. As the waters receded, Manu together with his family and the remnants of all living creatures went down the slope to repopulate the earth. Inhabitants of Uttarakhand identify the mountain of the flood as Nanda Devi itself, and one local group, the Rajis, still regard the peak as the abode of their ancestors. According to one legend, the seven sages associated with the Rishi Ganga accompanied Manu in his boat and remained behind to dwell in the company of the goddess herself.[24]

For the people of the region, Nanda Devi is a more than a place of myth: it is a living presence. While doing research, I visited Mukti Datta, an Indian friend who lived on a ridge in view of the sacred mountain. One night local villagers assembled in her home to perform a shamanistic ritual inviting the goddess to come from Mount Kailas to Nanda Devi and possess a medium, a village woman. As a group of men chanted in time to hypnotic drumming, she began to shake and fell into a trance. Eyes closed, she rose and danced, her body undulating in slow, swaying steps. At that moment, to the shock of everyone, a Western hippie who had asked to witness the ritual stood up and joined the medium's dance. The drumming abruptly stopped, and the villagers looked at each other with worried faces. They had summoned a local protector deity in advance of the goddess, and if they could not perform the ceremony properly and send him back, he could cause all kinds of trouble.

While they sorted out what to do, I went back to my room to get another camera. The one I had been using had jammed and refused to work. When I returned, the villagers started up the ceremony from the beginning and sent the protector deity successfully back. Nanda Devi then possessed the medium, and we all passed by her so she could dispense the goddess's blessings, placing her hands on our heads. I had to focus my second camera manually, and barely able to see through the viewfinder at night, I expected most of the pictures to be blurred. To my surprise, when I had the film developed back home, all the photographs were sharp – in perfect focus and exposure. This was highly unusual, and I wondered what had really happened.

The beautiful peak of Nanda Devi has cast its spell over Westerners as well as Indians. A succession of mountaineering expeditions, beginning in 1883, tried without success to penetrate the veil of the goddess and reach her mysterious sanctuary beyond the impassable gorges of the Rishi Ganga. Finally, in 1934, the British climbers and explorers Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman managed to force a tenuous passage through the cliffs and became the first humans ever to

enter the lovely valley at the foot of the sacred peak itself. Shipton wrote of his experience:

> We were now actually in the inner sanctuary of the Nanda Devi Basin, and at each step I experienced that subtle thrill which anyone of imagination must feel when treading hitherto unexplored country. Each corner held some thrilling secret to be revealed for the trouble of looking. My most blissful dream as a child was to be in some such valley, free to wander where I like, and discover for myself some hitherto unrevealed glory of Nature. Now the reality was no less wonderful than that half-forgotten dream; and of how many childish fancies can that be said, in this age of disillusionment?[25]

Two years later, in 1936, Tilman returned with an Anglo-American expedition to climb the mountain. The day they reached the summit, an enormous storm at the end of the monsoon caused a sacred river in the area to flood and partially destroy a village, sweeping away the lives of forty people. When some members of the expedition visited the high Hindu priest of Badrinath afterward and asked him if the villagers would hold them responsible for offending the goddess and causing the deaths, he replied, "No, they will regard you as *mahatamas*, great-souled ones, for having climbed the mountain."

On the way down the mountain, people at another village had asked the expedition members if they had seen the golden pagoda and pond said to be on the summit, and when told they had not, they refused to believe that they had actually climbed the peak. The climbers mentioned this to the priest at Badrinath, and he said, with a smile, "No, you probably wouldn't have seen those things."[26]

Some years later Nanda Devi cast its spell on another climber, giving rise to a tragic but beautiful story that brings together the cultures of East and West. Willi Unsoeld, a well-known American mountaineer who made the first ascent of the west ridge of Mount Everest, saw Nanda Devi as a young man and thought the peak so lovely that he vowed if he ever had a daughter he would name her after it. In the course of time he married, and his wife gave birth to a girl, whom they named Nanda Devi Unsoeld. When Devi, as she was called, reached the age of twenty-one, she decided that she wanted to climb the peak whose name she bore. She and her father organized an expedition that included some of the most experienced mountaineers in America, and in 1977 they set out for Nanda Devi.

After struggling through the gorge of the Rishi Ganga, the first group of climbers reached the summit by a difficult new route. Devi climbed up to a high camp at 24,000 feet to make the second ascent. However, after a day of being tent-bound in a storm, she felt too ill to continue. As they were preparing to descend, she suddenly sat up and said, very calmly, "I am going to die." And

she died in her father's arms. Willi tried without success to revive her until, heart-broken, he realized that she was dead. His description of what followed reveals the depth of his feelings for his daughter and the mountain for which he had named her:

> We agreed that it would be most fitting for Devi's body to be committed to the snows of the mountain for which she had come to feel such a deep attachment. Andy, Peter and I knelt in a circle in the snow and grasped hands while each chanted a broken farewell to the comrade who had so recently filled such a vivid place in our lives. My final prayer was one of thanksgiving for a world filled with the sublimity of the high places, for the sheer beauty of the mountains and for the surpassing miracle that we should be so formed as to respond with ecstasy to such beauty, and for the constant element of danger without which the mountain experience would not exercise such a grip on our sensibilities. We then laid the body to rest in its icy tomb, at rest on the breast of the Bliss-Giving Goddess Nanda.[27]

The story continues. On the way to the mountain, Devi had made a great impression on the porters and villagers along the trail. Having lived in Kathmandu with her father, who had served there as Peace Corps director, she spoke Nepali, which had enabled her to communicate with the people in their own, closely related language of Garwhali. The natural warmth of her personality and her obvious interest in them and their welfare had touched them deeply. In addition, her striking blonde hair had elicited comparisons with Gauri, the golden form of the goddess Parvati. When the local villagers heard of her death, they concluded that she had not really died. According to them, Willi's vow to name his daughter Nanda Devi had caused the deity to enter her body and become incarnate in her. Her apparent death was, in fact, the goddess' way of coming back home to her mountain. And so, a new myth entered the sacred lore surrounding the beautiful peak of Nanda Devi.[28]

ANNAPURNA AND MACHAPUCHARE

The goddess Parvati dwells in yet another form on another sacred mountain that occupies a prominent place in the history of mountaineering: Annapurna, the first of the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks – the highest in the world – to be climbed. Named like Nanda Devi for the deity said to reside on its summit, this 26,545-foot peak was the scene not only of the mystical experience described by Maurice Herzog in the introduction to this book, but also of a terrible ordeal that followed in which he dropped his mittens and lost his fingers and toes to frostbite. Infused with a sense of the spiritual significance of mountain climbing, his beautifully written account of the French expedition that climbed the mountain in 1950 remains to this day a classic of Himalayan mountaineering

literature. It was appropriate that twenty-eight years later, in 1978, the abode of a female deity should have become the objective of the first American women's expedition to an 8,000-meter peak. On October 15, after a long and dangerous climb, Vera Komarkova and Irene Miller succeeded in reaching the summit. Tragically, two members of the expedition, Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz and Vera Watson, disappeared on the mountain two days later, and their bodies now lie enshrined with the goddess in the soft and lovely snows of Annapurna.[29]

A range of peaks that includes Gangapurna, Machapuchare, and Annapurnas One through Four, Annapurna rises in one long sweep above the lush green hills of central Nepal. Seen from the tropical valley of Pokhara in the twilight before dawn, its peaks appear to float like bluish-grey icebergs on a sea of liquid shadows. As the first rays of the sun touch their summits and glide down ridges of snow and rock, the mountains turn translucent and appear to glow with an inner light, as if they were wax-paper lanterns lit by candles placed within them by the goddess herself. Etched with shadowed flutings, the corrugated face of Annapurna One, the highest summit, becomes a golden backdrop to the slender pointed peak of Machapuchare, the Fish's Tail.

The name Annapurna means in Sanskrit "She Who is Filled with Rice (or Food)." A kind-hearted goddess of plenty, Annapurna is the Queen of Varanasi, the holy city of the Hindus on the banks of the Ganges south of Nepal. Each year, after the autumn harvest, the people of Varanasi celebrate a festival dedicated to her called Annakuta, the "Food Mountain," in which they fill her temple with a mountain of food – rice, lentils, and sweets of all kinds to be distributed to those who come to receive her blessings. There, installed in her place of worship, she reigns with Shiva, the presiding deity and lord of the most sacred of Indian cities. For more than 2,000 years, Hindu pilgrims have been coming to Varanasi from all parts of India to bathe in the sacred waters of the Ganges and, at the end of their lives, to have their bodies cremated and their ashes cast into the river. The goddess Annapurna provides them with sustenance in life, while Shiva grants them liberation at death. Together they satisfy all the material and spiritual needs of their devotees.[30]

Within the heart of the range, at the foot of the sheer south face of Annapurna One, lies a hidden basin of beautiful meadows and glaciers, resembling the sanctuary surrounding the peak of Nanda Devi. A great curtain of rock and ice, draped between mountains soaring to over 26,000 feet, completely encloses this natural amphitheater, dropping nowhere lower than 19,000 feet – except at one place. There, an incredible gorge, 12,000 feet deep, slices through this otherwise impregnable barrier, right beneath the overhanging cliffs and glaciers of Machapuchare, one of the loveliest peaks in the Himalayas. A difficult trail made by shepherds and hunters leads up it

through a bamboo jungle across slabs of rock slick with mud, where a slip can mean a broken leg or a shattered skull.

The Gurung people who live in the villages on the way to the gorge regard the Annapurna Sanctuary as the sacred abode of various deities – Hindu, Buddhist, and animistic. In the past they would not allow meat, eggs, untouchables, or women into its restricted precincts. According to one legend, the Sanctuary is the repository of sacred treasures: jewels, gold, and silver guarded by serpent deities called *nagas*. Once, long ago, a group of lower caste untouchables went up there to dig for the hidden riches. They brought along meat and eggs and behaved in such an appalling way that the king of the *nagas* destroyed their mine and all but one of the men. Since that time such things have been prohibited to the few shepherds who take their flocks of goats and sheep up during the summer months to graze in the flowered meadows beneath the snow peaks of the Sanctuary. When I went there in 1968, before many foreigners had started trekking in Nepal, the old men of the last village were grumbling that a few Western women had recently gone into the forbidden area and offended the deities, causing rock slides to cover the trail and make it even more difficult and perilous to follow.

Machapuchare, the most spectacular peak in the Annapurna Range, stands guard over the gorge leading into the Sanctuary. From a cave at the entrance to the amphitheater itself, its delicate summit will sometimes materialize out of the mist at sunset, to appear suspended in a golden haze almost 15,000 feet directly overhead at an altitude of 22,943 feet above sea level. The mountain is so imposing that for the people living near Annapurna, it acts like a magnet, drawing to itself whatever deity they regard as the highest and most powerful. Villagers with whom I spoke referred to it variously as the abode of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva, a local deity named Pujinim Barahar, and Tara, the Savioress of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light.[31]

From a mountaineer's point of view, Machapuchare appears almost impossible to climb. However, a small expedition led by Wilfred Noyce, a British climber of Everest fame, nearly reached the summit in 1957. Grooves of slick blue ice stopped them only 150 feet from the top. Realizing that the deity of the mountain had defeated them, they turned back and descended without regrets, content with what they had achieved. After their attempt, at the urging of the British military officer who organized the expedition, the government of Nepal declared Machapuchare a sacred peak, off limits to all climbers. And it remains to this day unclimbed, one of the few places left on earth reserved for only the gods.[32]

KANGCHENJUNGA

Of all the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks, the most sacred by various measures is not Annapurna, but Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. Rising

in regal splendor to over 28,000 feet on the border with Nepal, it dominates the Himalayan principality of Sikkim and plays a central role in the religious life of the Sikkimese, who view the peak as the divine protector of their country. When a British expedition set out to climb Kangchenjunga in 1955, the Sikkimese, Indian, and Nepali governments, fearing the harm that might come of provoking the wrath of the deity, officially asked the climbers to call off their attempt. Their leader, Charles Evans, worked out a compromise whereby he promised that the mountaineers would stop just short of the summit to avoid desecrating the seat of the god himself. The climbers kept their word: when they reached a point twenty feet from the top, they declared the mountain climbed and turned back, leaving the highest snows untouched by human feet.

Seen from the hill resort of Darjeeling at sunrise, when the clouds have settled in the valleys below it, the mountain rises through a series of ridges, faces, and peaks to culminate in a summit of pristine snow, serene and silent in the first light of the morning sun. Despite its incredible mass and bulk, spreading over several degrees of the northern horizon, Kangchenjunga gives an overwhelming impression of lightness and grace. It presents a vision not so much of a mountain as of another world floating like a cloud above ours. Tibetan texts compare the peak to a king seated on a throne draped with curtains of white silk. In its row of five summits they see the five points of a crown worn by the mountain deity who reigns over the peaceful valleys of Sikkim.

In Tibetan the name *Kangchenjunga* means either "Five Treasuries of Great Snow" or "Five Brothers of Great Snow." The first meaning refers to five treasures said to be hidden inside the five summits of the peak: the highest summit that catches the golden light of dawn contains gold, the one that remains in grey shadow has silver, while the other three hold jewels, grains, and holy books. Appropriately enough, Vasiravana, the Buddhist god of wealth, dwells on the mountain as the guardian and dispenser of these treasures. The texts describe him as a corpulent deity with a red lance and banner, seated on a snow lion playing on the tops of mountains. As the identity of the fifth treasure, holy books, suggests, the precious things hidden within the snows of Kangchenjunga have a spiritual as well as material significance, referring ultimately to the riches of wisdom and compassion found on the way to enlightenment. According to the second meaning of the mountain's name, the treasures are guarded by five divine brothers, each perched on a different summit, riding a different mount: a lion, an elephant, a horse, a dragon, and a mythical kind of eagle.[33]

The original inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepchas, have their own name for Kangchenjunga – Konglo Chu, the "Highest Veil of Ice." They trace their mythical origins back to a man and a woman fashioned from the ice of its glaciers by the creator deity of their indigenous religion. According to their beliefs, behind the great wall of Kangchenjunga, spread across the northern horizon like a veil of ice, lies the mysterious kingdom of the dead to which they go when

they die. Some of the shrines they build in villages high beneath its snows contain cairn-like stones, which represent the sacred mountain and the peaks around it. Priests will bring ceremonial yaks to these stones to sacrifice them to Kongchen, the deity of Kangchenjunga, imploring him to protect their people from the forces of evil that menace not only them, but the country as a whole.[34]

Sikkimese of Tibetan descent, who took over political control in the seventeenth century and ruled the principality until 1975, also regard Kangchenjunga as a protective deity in its own right – the warrior god named after the mountain itself. According to their traditional accounts, when Lhatsun Chembo, the lama who brought Buddhism to Sikkim, was seeking a way over the mountains from Tibet, Kangchenjunga took the form of a wild goose and flew to greet him. They met on a high place just north of the present-day border, and there the deity described to him the land he was going to settle. With the information that Kangchenjunga gave him, Lhatsun Chembo was able to lead his party over the passes into Sikkim, where he appointed one of his followers to be the Chogyal or ruler of the country, which Tibetans had long regarded as a mysterious hidden sanctuary resembling the fictional Shangri-La of the Western novel *Lost Horizon*. On the way the lama used his magic powers to fly to the summit of Kabru, a snow peak near Kangchenjunga, to survey the secluded valleys that ancient prophecies had said he would open for those who would need refuge in times of trouble.

After arriving in Sikkim, Lhatsun Chembo gave offerings of thanks to the god of Kangchenjunga. His followers expanded the thanksgiving into an elaborate ceremony of sacred dances that has continued to this day. The performance takes place annually on a meadow in front of the main temple in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, within view of the peak itself. Colorfully dressed warriors, representing the armed retinue of the mountain deity, leap and whirl with war cries and swords, clearing the area of evil influences. When they have finished their dance, the figure of Kangchenjunga emerges, portrayed by a lama in ornate robes of silk brocade, wearing a red mask with an angry grimace and a hideous mouth with four protruding fangs. Like mountain deities in Tibet, he possesses a wrathful appearance to drive away demons and other spirits that threaten the religion and wellbeing of the people. A third eye, symbolizing spiritual wisdom and power, blazes in the center of his forehead. He carries in one hand a lance decorated with a victory banner and in the other a jewel; five flags flutter in a war helmet set on his head. With slow and stately steps, in time to the beat of cymbals and drums reinforced by the deep rumble of twelve-foot horns, he performs the sacred dance that each year renews the power of Buddhism and protects Sikkim from the insidious forces of evil.[35]

In 1977 the Indian government created Khangchendzonga National Park, named for the mountain and including Kangchenjunga and adjacent glaciers, peaks, valleys, and sacred sites and shrines in Sikkim. In 2016, in recognition of

both its extraordinary beauty and natural features and its deep cultural and spiritual significance, UNESCO inscribed the park as the first World Heritage site in India designated as a both a natural and a cultural site. In the past most World Heritage sites have been either natural, such as Yellowstone National Park in the United States, or cultural, such as the Taj Mahal in India. A growing number, however, are now combining the two, recognizing the artificial dichotomy between culture and nature.[36]

I had the opportunity to trek into the park up to the foot of Kangchenjunga. Along the way we passed the 23,000-foot peak of Siniolchu, regarded in the 1930s by the British as the most beautiful mountain in the world with elegant ridges adorned with flutings of snow and ice angling gracefully down from its perfectly pointed summit. Continuing up the valley, we watched in awe as one avalanche after another cascaded in waves down the huge east face of Kangchenjunga, rising straight up in a terrifying wall of snow, ice, and rock 10,000 feet tall. A number of mountaineers had nominally climbed Kangchenjunga, having agreed to stop just short of the sacred summit itself. But no one, I surmised, would ever climb that face and return to tell of it.

The Himalayas are mountains of great power and beauty. That power and beauty can make itself felt in profound and mysterious ways. When I first came to the Himalayas in 1968, I went climbing in the Annapurna Sanctuary. Two of us were nervously following our companions up a broad snow slope that issued from a gully cut into the side of a ridge. Tiers of small glaciers lined the rock walls of the ravine, threatening to tumble off in avalanches.

My eye wandered up to a glacier hanging over a cliff near the crest of the ridge. As I looked at it, it shattered. The ice blurred and hung poised for a moment, as though encased in plastic film. Then, with a silent roar, the entire front of the glacier collapsed and plunged over the cliff into the gully below. Striking a foot of fresh powder snow, the ice threw up a billowing white cloud that began to rush toward us. Its sound, audible now, echoed from the peaks around us, shaking the ice axes in our hands.

"Avalanche!"

The cloud burst out of the gully and exploded across the slope, soaring 100 feet into the air. The avalanche swept down on us, a line of ice blocks seething along its leading edge. The roar was tremendous, louder than anything I had ever heard, like the sound of bombs bursting in 100 thunderstorms.

"There, that crevasse, jump in it!" my companion, Ned Fetcher, yelled and dashed toward a blue line in the slope to our right. I hesitated, staring at my pack, then grabbed it and ran after him. Despite the weight of the snow clutching at my crampons, I felt no fatigue. I was aware only of the pearly white cloud bearing down on us. For a moment, as if from a height, I saw two tiny figures running in front of it, like two soldiers in a war movie dashing across a battlefield with bombs bursting behind them – except the bomb bursts

were beautifully white and the figures were carrying ice axes, not guns. We both stopped: the crevasse was too far to reach. The slope stretched wide and smooth around us. There was no place to go, no place to hide.

I suddenly realized that I was going to die.

The snow peaks around me were shining calmly in a clear, bright sky. I saw the mountains as though they were on a screen in a movie theater, which I was about to leave. A spasm of guilt shot through me, and with a terrific wrench, the whole universe seemed to flip over in the pit of my stomach, never to be the same again.

As I watched in terror, something deep within me rose up and took over. With my mind screaming, it's no use! I carefully placed my pack across the slope as a shield and curled up behind it. All my movements had become very smooth and precise, as if I knew exactly what I was doing. As the avalanche cloud passed across the sun, the light turned grey, followed by a moment of roaring darkness. There was a sharp, hard blow, and I was off, flying in a rush of snow and air, as if caught in the wild foam of a wave breaking on a beach.

I found myself swimming with the avalanche, automatically moving my arms and legs. Things were hitting me – blocks of ice, I assumed. At any moment one of them would crush me. I could not understand why I was swimming: it seemed so utterly futile. After what seemed a long time – I was carried perhaps 1,000 feet – it occurred to me that I might survive. I thought of an airplane taking off into the wind and tried to turn myself into the avalanche in order to rise to its surface. But a tremendous force flipped me the other way, into a dive, and flung out my arms, away from my face.

As the avalanche ground to a stop, the snow tightened around me and set like concrete. When I tried to breathe, nothing came. The snow was jammed like a hand across my mouth and nose. I tried to dig an air space, but I could not even wriggle my fingers, which were bare – the avalanche had ripped off my gloves. Terror coursed through me: I was going to suffocate, one of the most horrible ways to die that I could imagine. As I fought for air, my lungs heaved and shook with unbearable pain.

For no apparent reason, I stopped trying to breathe, and a strange calm came over me. The pain, the anguish, and the terror all dwindled away, and I saw that there was nothing, literally nothing, to fear. Death was not anything at all. I would simply become part of the snow and ice around me. The sensation, in fact, was quite pleasant. Letting myself drift into it, I began to die.

Suddenly, my hand was in front of my face, and I had air to breathe. In one motion, without any direction from me, it had sliced through the snow and cleared a space. With that little bit of air, I would have to dig myself out. As far as I knew, my companions were dead, and nobody would come looking for us for at least a week. When I tried to dig, my fingernails merely scratched the icy snow. I wrenched my body, but my arms and legs were locked in tubes of ice. I could feel my boots sticking out, flailing in the air above.

I jumped to the conclusion that I was pinned under a block of ice. I remembered reading how a French climber had chiseled his way out from under an ice block in the Alps with a pocketknife and a piton. But he had done that at half the altitude I was at in the Himalayas, without the thin air at 19,000 feet. And, because of the snow, I could not reach the knife in my pocket. I would freeze to death, locked in the ice. Panic tore through me, followed once again by the strange calm. As I ceased to struggle, my body, on its own, made an explosive wrench, and in one clean movement I popped free.

I was rolling on my back in blue and white blurs of sky and snow. Shaking and gasping, I rose to my feet. My hands felt stiff and frozen, like leather. I looked across the Sanctuary to the summit of Annapurna One where Maurice Herzog had dropped his mittens. Would I also lose my fingers to frostbite? I stuck my hands inside my shirt and felt them warm up from the heat of my stomach.

"Ed, come up!"

I looked up the rubble left by the avalanche. Fifty feet above me, still tied on the climbing rope, was Ned, sitting upright in the snow, buried from the waist down. Feeling utterly exhausted, inclined to sit and do nothing, I struggled up to him.

"Here, dig me out," he said, pointing at the snow packed over his legs.

"I can't. My hands are frozen."

"Dig anyway."

I began to kick gingerly at the snow, afraid of gashing his legs with the spikes of my crampons. Ned scraped with his hands. The snow was so hard that we made little progress.

A booming sound brought our efforts to a halt. Another hanging glacier had collapsed, and another avalanche was roaring down on us. I tried to run as before, but the rope had become tangled around my legs, and I could not take even a step. It was useless to try to escape. This time I just stood and stared at the oncoming cloud. I was too exhausted to lie down and try to protect myself. All I could do was think, my God, after all this, it's unfair.

The avalanche stopped a few yards away, and snow mist blew across our faces, cold and harsh against the skin. For a moment I stood, and Ned sat, both of us too shocked to move. Then, not caring whether I gashed his legs, I kicked with all my strength, and we dug him free.

We came down from the mountain and remained for three days in the Annapurna Sanctuary. From time to time I would look up to see a snow cloud sweep down the slope we had attempted to climb. In the experience of the avalanche, I had come to know something of the power and beauty of mountains that makes them sacred to people of so many different cultures and religions.

TWO

CHINA

Mountains of the Middle Kingdom

Although not as high as the Himalayas, the mountains of traditional China possess an extraordinary beauty and richness of character that make them equally impressive – and just as evocative. Some, like the limestone pinnacles and granite peaks of the south, hang poised over rivers and plains in such incredible shapes of delicate rock that they look as if they could only exist in a Chinese landscape painting where the laws of gravity need not apply. Others, such as the imposing massif of Tai Shan in the east, stand as monuments of ancient stone, made venerable by ages of erosion. On the border with North Korea rises the highest peak in northern China – Changbai Shan, an extinct volcano with an enormous caldera embracing the sacred waters of Heaven Lake. Known as Paektu San in the Korean language, the mountain is revered by the people of both North and South Korea as their spiritual home and the birthplace of the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom, a divine ruler born of a mythic bear turned woman. Elsewhere ranges of grassy mountains arch up through layers of wind-deposited loess to writhe like dragons across the undulating terrain of northern China, their rough flanks riven by gorges and bristling with cliffs. In the southwestern part of the country, fault-block peaks slant up to cast long shadows over wide green basins and deep blue valleys, bearing witness to massive forces at work beneath the earth. Here and there, dotted throughout the mountainous landscape of China, the light touch of a temple on a ridge or a gnarled pine on a crag in mist lends an air of

intimate beauty lacking in the stupendous views presented by the great ice ranges of the Himalayas.[1]

Unlike the higher peaks to the west, the mountains of China do not lie on the edges of the known world, in wild and mythical regions far from the centers of civilization. Many of them rise within sight of millions of people in farms, villages, towns, and cities scattered throughout the country. Living in a landscape dominated by mountains, the Chinese have long regarded them as sacred places imbued with special power and significance. Popular belief holds that they form the body of a cosmic being – according to some, a dragon whose twists and turns create the surface of the land on which the Chinese live. Rocks are its bones, streams its blood, trees and grass its hair, while clouds and mist are the white vapor of its magic breath, the essence of life itself. An ancient definition found in the oldest Chinese dictionary explains that mountains "give birth to the ten thousand beings" – a reference to the sum total of all living creatures.[2]

For the Chinese, mountains are not just inspiring places of beauty and grandeur: they embody in concrete form the basic principle of fertility that renews and sustains the world. As the belief about the cosmic being suggests, clouds and mist that bring rain do not simply gather around the summits of peaks and hills; rather, they emanate from within them as their breath, just as streams and rivers issue from their flanks. A people who live mostly by tilling the soil, the Chinese have from prehistoric times revered mountains as divine sources of life-giving water, responsible for their well-being and survival. Until the Communist Revolution in 1948, nearly every village in China had a temple dedicated to the local mountain god who controlled the rains and protected the region from drought and flood.

The earliest Chinese references to mountains as sacred places link them to the cult of the emperor. The *Shujing* a classic of traditional history compiled around the fifth century BCE, tells us that Shun, a legendary ruler of the third millennium BCE, made it a practice every five years to visit four peaks that marked the four quarters of his realm. At each peak he offered sacrifices to Heaven and granted audiences that reasserted his sovereignty over the princes of the local region. The title of the highest official in his court, the "[Chief of the] Four Mountains," reveals the importance of these peaks and their role as symbols for the divisions of people and territory comprising the empire. The sacrifice performed at each one also reflects the ancient Chinese view of mountains as sacred links with Heaven, from which the emperor, as Son of Heaven, received his mandate to rule.[3]

Confucianism, the traditional system of ritual and ethics codified by Confucius (Kongfuzi) in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE, held up Shun as the model of the perfect ruler whose conduct all virtuous emperors should strive to emulate. Like the ideal emperor, who obtains his power and authority

through them, mountains embody for Confucians the important principle of stability on which the order of nature and society depends. The enormous mass of the mountain rests on the earth and keeps it from moving. In a similar way, the weight of divine authority invested in the emperor holds the empire in place and prevents disorder.

The Analects of Confucius use the image of a mountain to symbolize the peerless attribute of benevolence or *ren*, the virtue regarded by Confucians as more important than wisdom in the makeup of the superior person:

> The wise take pleasure in water, but the benevolent in mountains; because wisdom moves about, but benevolence remains still. Wisdom leads to happiness; benevolence to a long life.[4]

For Confucius a steady mind and a long life provide a solid foundation for an enduring social order based on the concepts of filial piety and concern for others.

The followers of Daoism – a mystically oriented collection of religious and philosophical traditions attributed to the sage Lao Zi, a reputed contemporary of Confucius – took a special interest in mountains. Until the fourth century CE, they regarded mountain peaks primarily as the awesome abode of various deities and supernatural beings – in particular, immortals who had discovered the way of living in harmony with the *Dao*, the Way or spiritual essence of reality that flows through all things. Daoists who sought longevity and immortality went up to the mountains to make contact with these divinities and receive the revelations and powers needed to fulfill their quests. There, in a wild landscape of primeval forests and pristine peaks, far from the worldly distractions of human life, they found the perfect place to pursue meditation and other esoteric practices. Mountains provided many of them with the special ingredients and setting required to concoct elixirs of immortality – alchemical potions which, they believed, would enable them to transform their bodies and attain their ultimate goal in one quick swallow.

Until the fourth century CE, most Chinese – Daoists in particular – regarded mountains as alluring but dangerous places of power that, like the palace of the emperor, one should only approach with the greatest of caution. True, one could obtain immortality on their numinous heights, but one could just as easily – in fact, much more easily – find death instead. Mountains were, in the words of the French scholar Paul Demiéville, "a zone of sacred horror." Around 320 CE, Ge Hong, a well-known sage and compiler of Daoist lore, wrote:

> Even the sages who lay claim to knowing all and go to the mountains in search of long life put themselves at risk of violent death. All the mountains, whether large or small, are haunted by supernatural beings: great ones on the great mountains, little ones on the little. And if one does not

> take appropriate precautionary measures, they will afflict one with sickness, injuries, vexations, terror, and anguish. Sometimes the traveler will see lights and shadows; sometimes he will hear strange noises. Great trees will crash down on him without there being any wind; rocks will fall without warning and strike him dead. Or, yet again, seized with panic, he will throw himself into the depths of a ravine, trying to avoid the attacks of tigers, wolves, and poisonous animals. One does not venture into the mountains lightly.[5]

The precautionary measures recommended by Ge Hong include equipping oneself with protective spells and amulets – most notably the talisman of the True Form of the Five Peaks, a symbolic representation of the mountains visited by the legendary emperor Shun (supplemented by a fifth, central peak added at a later date).

At the time Ge Hong wrote his warning, a new, less daunting view of mountains was emerging, one that would dominate Chinese poetry and painting throughout the following centuries. The occupation of the imperial capital of Loyang by barbarians in 311 CE sent many literati, who were officials of the court, fleeing south to the vicinity of Nanjing. There, in the basin of the Yangzi River, they found a rippling landscape of well-watered hills and peaks, greener and far more appealing than the brown plains and dry mountains of the north. The political turbulence of the period made these beautiful peaks doubly attractive to intellectuals imbued with both Confucian and Daoist sensibilities. The corruption and disorder that pervaded society led many of them to feel that virtue had left the lowlands to return to its source in the pure and untrammeled reaches of the mountains. There, secluded among peaks and valleys untouched by people, living in harmony with the natural order of things, they might experience the Dao and recover a tranquility and simplicity of life impossible to find in the tumult of the world below. The mountains became paradises of perfection, as the following verses from a poem composed in the fifth century so beautifully show:

> In the mountains all is pure, all is calm;
> All complication is cut off.
> Rare are they who know to listen;
> Happy they who possess wisdom.
>
> If the cold wind stings and bothers you,
> Sit in the sun: it is always warm there.
> Its hot rays burn like flames,
> While, opposite, in the shade, all is frost and snow.
>
> One pauses on ledges, one climbs to the foot of high clouds;
> One sits in the depths of a gorge, one passes windy grottos.
> Here is the realm of harmony and joy,
> Where the past and the present become eternal.[6]

Although the verses express sentiments shared by literati with Daoist and Confucian inclinations, the author of this poem was himself a Buddhist. Coming from India via the Silk Route of Central Asia, Buddhism had reached China four centuries earlier during the first century CE. Its goal of enlightenment, resulting in a release from the painful round of birth and death, distinguished it from Daoism and Confucianism with their more worldly aims of attaining immortality through living in harmony with the Dao and creating a well-ordered society based on the virtue of benevolence. Like Daoist hermits, with whom they shared an affinity for solitary meditation, Buddhist monks found the mountains an ideal environment for spiritual practices and visionary experiences. Where Daoists saw the mysterious Dao winding in and out of the clouds, Buddhists found in the vast and empty views of peaks and sky a perfect expression of emptiness or the void – the ultimate nature of reality. Out of such affinities came new forms of Buddhism, most notably the meditation school of Chan – or, in Japanese, Zen – which shows the strong influence of Daoist ideas. A poem by Hanshan, a celebrated Chan practitioner and mountain recluse of the Tang Dynasty, reads:

> Men these days search for a way through the clouds,
> But the cloud way is dark and without sign.
> The mountains are high and often steep and rocky;
> In the broadest valleys the sun seldom shines.
> Green crests before you and behind,
> White clouds to east and west —
> Do you want to know where the cloud way lies?
> There it is, in the midst of the Void![7]

Hanshan, who lived sometime between the sixth and ninth centuries, made his home on a mountain of the Tiantai range in Zhejiang Province of southeastern China. Tiantai lent its name to an important and influential religious sect – the Tiantai school of Buddhism. A well-known haunt of Daoist recluses and poets, the airy crags and peaks of the range attracted Zhiyi, the Buddhist monk who founded this sect in the sixth century. Based on the idea that everyone possesses a Buddha nature, his teachings attempted to bring all forms of Buddhism together as a means of leading all beings to enlightenment. Tiantai attained great importance in China and spread to Japan, where, pronounced in Japanese as "Tendai," it became one of the most influential Buddhist sects in that country.

Various expressions used by Daoists and Buddhists reflect their common enchantment with mountains as the perfect environment for the practice of their respective traditions. The Daoist term for an immortal, *xian*, is composed of two pictographs, one of which represents a man, the other a mountain. In terms of its visual implications, the word means "a man of the mountains," or

a hermit. Since Buddhists tended to establish their monasteries in mountainous regions where they could practice meditation far from the distractions of the outside world, the Chinese word for mountain, *shan*, took on the meaning of a monastery. The expression "to open a mountain" means, for example, "to found a monastery or sect." "To enter the mountains" is another way of saying "to embark on religious or spiritual practice," which for Buddhists and Daoists usually took place in mountains, where many monasteries and hermitages were situated.[8]

The period of turbulence that followed the fall of Loyang in 311 CE continued until the seventh century, with China divided into regions governed by northern and southern dynasties. With the restoration of a unified empire under the Tang Dynasty in 618, the positive attitude toward mountains that had emerged earlier underwent a shift of emphasis that would have lasting effects. Where the literati had previously regarded the misty heights of peaks as a refuge from disorder and chaos, now they saw them as an escape from the stifling confines of an imperial bureaucracy that imposed too rigid an order on office holders. In their poetry and painting mountains stand out as symbols of a free and natural realm of the spirit, untrammeled by the artificial constraints of society. Wang Wei, one of the foremost poets and painters of the Tang Dynasty, took special delight on leaving his official post for a retreat where he could wander freely in the mountains "amid beauty that is all for me."[9]

The view of mountains as sanctuaries of the spirit carried on as an enduring feature of the literary and artistic landscape of China, shaping the attitudes of intellectuals through the succeeding centuries, right up to the present day. We can see its influence at work in the Communist art and literature of recent times. During their long struggle to gain control of China, the Communists under Mao Zedong found the mountains a natural refuge from forces that sought to destroy them and their revolutionary spirit. Contemporary paintings and murals depicting scenes from that time commonly use mountain landscapes to inspire heroic feelings in the beholder and to express ideas of spiritual renewal needed to maintain enthusiasm for the new order. Mao himself wrote poetry in the style of the classic poets of the Tang Dynasty and many of his poems reflect their views of mountains as sacred places. In one particularly evocative poem, he describes the awesome ranges of eastern Tibet that he and his followers crossed in the Long March that saved them from destruction at the hands of the Nationalist army and ends with the words that without the support of these soaring peaks, "Heaven would fall." To magnify the significance of the Red Army's accomplishments, Mao drew on ancient views of sacred mountains as links with heaven and symbols of strength and stability.[10]

TAI SHAN AND THE FIVE PEAKS OF THE IMPERIAL CULT

For more than 2,000 years the Chinese have singled out five peaks as the principal sacred mountains of China: Tai Shan in the east, Heng Shan to the north, Hua Shan in the west, another Heng Shan to the south, and Song Shan in the center. Tradition has identified four of these peaks with the four said to have been visited by the legendary ruler Shun on his tours of ritual inspection in the third millennium BCE. However, the *Shujing*, the oldest surviving description of the sacrifices performed by Shun, refers to only the eastern one, Tai Shan, by name and makes no mention of a central peak, implying that the identification of the remaining three and the addition of a mountain in the center took place at a later date. From places of ritual importance enshrined in the imperial cult, the five peaks have become focal points for a multitude of beliefs and practices associated with Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the folk traditions of the people.[11]

Rising to a height of 6,617 feet in Shanxi Province, Heng Shan, the sacred mountain of the north, stands like a sentinel on the frontier between the terraced fields of northern China and the open grasslands of Inner Mongolia. A great mass of rugged cliffs and meandering ridges, it faces the site of one of the most spectacularly situated temples in China. The name of this temple, Xuankong Si, means the "Temple Hanging in Air" and gives a precise description of its appearance. It literally hangs on the side of a gorge beneath overarching cliffs. Wooden beams driven into holes drilled in the rock support a spidery looking structure of delicate pagodas that appear to float in the air. Located on the main approach to the sacred mountain, the temple overlooks a stream named, appropriately, the "Brook of the Gods." It was built in the time of the Northern Wei Dynasty, around 400 CE, but the original wood used to attach it to the cliff has long since rotted away and been replaced a number of times. When I visited the temple, I could feel the platforms linking the pagodas vibrate beneath my feet. A solitary monk who greeted us with a smile was taking care of shrine rooms filled with Buddhist and Daoist images, reflecting the various traditions of the pilgrims who come to pay homage to the deities of Heng Shan.

Of the five sacred mountains, the loveliest is Hua Shan, 6,988 feet high, the "Flower Mountain" of the west, located in Shaanxi Province about sixty miles from the ancient capital of Xi'an. Its slender peaks of polished rock ornamented with sprays of pines open up into the sky like the delicate petals of a flower frozen in eternal bloom. Where ridges dip between its graceful summits, little temples perched in notches overlook precipices that drop into chasms of blue space. A tenuous network of pilgrimage paths climbs through a maze of cliffs and lightly follows the cutting edges of knife-shaped blades of rock. A favorite haunt of Daoist priests and hermits before the Communist Revolution, Hua

Figure 3 Temples perched along a ridge on Hua Shan. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

Shan offers much to the pilgrim who can overcome a fear of heights and walk the clouds. For centuries Chinese poets and painters have evoked in unnerving detail the dizzy sensations of a hollow stomach inspired by its fathomless views. The landscape of the sacred mountain easily matches the wildest fantasies of the kind of airy place where sages commune with the stars in heaven.[12]

I climbed Hua Shan on the way back from circumambulating Mount Kailas in Tibet. A line of steps cut into the rock with iron cables to grasp took us up a granite face rivaling the sheer walls of Yosemite Valley in California. Along the way we passed a small boy standing without fear in a basket carried on the back of his father with thousands of feet of empty space below him. The knife-edge ridge leading to the summit was so narrow that we had to pass through temples that seemed to teeter on its crest. From the heights of the East Peak, where we spent the night, we could see, set precariously on top of a rock pinnacle, the famous "Chess Pavilion." According to Chinese legend, in the tenth century, the first emperor of the Song Dynasty played chess here with a Daoist master for control of the sacred mountain. The emperor lost, and Hua Shan became the preserve of Daoist hermits seeking to transform themselves through various forms of meditation – until the Communist Revolution and the advent of tourism in the twentieth century made such practices difficult to continue.[13]

The southern mountain, called Heng Shan like the northern peak, but written with different characters, lies south of the Yangzi River in the province of Hunan. It rises to a modest height of 4,232 feet above paddies of rice flooded with water and bordered by clumps of bamboo. The mountain of the center, Song Shan stands in the central province of Henan, close to the cities where the ancient emperors of China reigned, southwest of the present-day capital of Beijing. Despite the meaning of its name, "the Lofty," its summit reaches to only 4,902 feet above sea level. Although we might expect the central mountain of the Middle Kingdom – as the Chinese call their country – to occupy a privileged position, Song Shan has not been singled out for particular distinction. The peak that has instead commanded the place of honor among all the sacred mountains of China is the mountain of the east – Tai Shan.

Located in the province of Shandong, halfway between Beijing and Shanghai, Tai Shan rises to a modest altitude of only 5,030 feet above sea level. Although some of the others, Hua Shan in particular, surpass it in both beauty and height, the position of Tai Shan makes it the most important of the five principal sacred mountains of China. As the eastern peak, it receives the first light of the sun, the divine source of all life. In the complex system of associations that structures much of Chinese symbolism, the direction of the east also corresponds to spring, the season of fertility and renewal. The mysterious power that refreshes and revitalizes the body and spirit of all living things flows through the sacred peak, shining forth from its summit in the first magic glow of dawn. For thousands of years, Chinese writers have eulogized Tai Shan as the supreme mountain, surpassing all others in spiritual height and significance. During the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu, regarded by many as China's greatest poet, wrote:

> With what can I compare the Great Peak?
> Over the surrounding provinces, its blue-green hue never dwindles from sight.
> Infused by the Shaper of Forms with the soaring power of divinity,
> Shaded and sunlit, its slopes divide night from day.
>
> Breast heaving as I climb toward the clouds,
> Eyes straining to follow birds flying home,
> Someday I shall reach its peerless summit,
> And behold all mountains in a single glance.[14]

Although not very high, Tai Shan is the highest and most impressive mountain in eastern China. Formed millions of years ago from a weathered intrusion of granitic magma, it sits solidly on the earth with a sense of immovable power and majesty, like an emperor seated on his throne. Ridges embroidered with intricate patterns of pines and cedars spread out from its flanks like the folds of a ceremonial robe. Steep slopes of grey rock, cut here and there by precipitous cliffs, emerge from its lower ramparts to stand out against the sky.

Set upon them like altars beneath the blue heights of heaven, the temples on top of Tai Shan overlook a vast panorama of hills and plains that extends to the ocean. When clouds and mist obliterate the world below, the stark landscape of the summit plateau takes on the atmosphere of a much higher mountain, and one can see why tradition has given Tai Shan its place of honor as the Great Peak of the Middle Kingdom.

Unlike the pristine peaks of higher ranges, such as the Himalayas, Tai Shan is a very humanized mountain, bearing the physical marks of thousands of years of religious devotion. A great staircase of 7,000 steps runs from Tai'an, the City of Peace at the foot of the peak, to the South Gate of Heaven near the top. The slopes and summit of Tai Shan are covered with shrines, temples, inns, and stalls for food and religious supplies. Every notable feature of the mountain, such as a ridge, boulder, or tree, has its own name – and often a monument to mark it. A great slab of rock that spreads over a hillside has the *Diamond Sutra* inscribed upon it in large Chinese characters. One of the most important works of Buddhist philosophy, this text reminds the passing pilgrim of the ultimate nature of reality, symbolized in the empty space of the blue sky that opens overhead as he or she climbs toward the summit of Tai Shan.

Although the legendary ruler Shun is said to have visited four sacred mountains, emperors of the historical period focused their attention on Tai Shan, the only one of the four mentioned specifically by name in the earliest histories. Those who felt confident enough of their accomplishments came to this mountain to perform the Feng and Shan sacrifices announcing the triumph of their dynasties' aspirations. Having reached the pinnacle of power and glory as the undisputed ruler of China, a successful emperor would ascend Tai Shan to extoll the merits of his ancestors and to thank the deities of heaven and earth for their help. The Feng sacrifice to Heaven he would perform at two altars: one at the base of the mountain to announce his intention to climb the peak and the other on the very summit, where he would make burnt offerings to the Jade Emperor of Heaven in the vast blue sky. The Shan ritual to the god of the earth would take place, appropriately, on a low hill near the foot of Tai Shan. As a means of ensuring the longevity of his line, the emperor would have the declaration of his dynasty's accomplishments and the expression of his gratitude engraved on jade tablets. These tablets would be sealed in a jade chest inside a box of stone and left to remain for all time on the summit of the sacred mountain. The first historical emperor to leave a physical record of having visited the sacred mountain was Qin Shi Huang, the self-proclaimed "First Emperor of China," who initiated the construction of the Great Wall in the third century BCE. In 1974 a farmer plowing his fields made the startling discovery of an underground army of life-size statues of warriors guarding the approaches to the emperor's extravagant tomb – a mountain-shaped

tumulus outside the present-day city of Xi'an that had still not been excavated in 2019.[15]

Having brought China under the rule of his dynasty, Qin Shi Huang decided to commemorate the event by performing a sacrifice on the summit of Tai Shan. When the local scholars told him that he must climb the mountain on foot and conduct the ceremony in a simple and humble way, he shocked them all by driving up the slopes in his royal chariot. The literary records tell us that the scandalized officials stood by the path and shook their fingers at him in angry disapproval. On the way down from the summit, a sudden storm lashed him with wind and rain, forcing him to seek shelter beneath a nearby pine. The scholars claimed it was an expression of divine displeasure provoked by his impudence, but in defiance of their opinions, Qin Shi Huang conferred the honorary title of an Official of the Fifth Rank on the tree. A pavilion constructed in memory of the incident stands in a grove of trees said to have descended from the honored pine, forming one of the notable features of the pilgrimage route up Tai Shan. The stone monuments that Qin Shi Huang left as evidence of his ascent in 219 BCE make no mention of the Feng or Shan sacrifices: in keeping with his arrogant attitude, they simply glorify his ascent of the sacred mountain.

The first ruler to leave a stone inscription specifically mentioning the Feng and Shan sacrifices was Han Wudi, the powerful emperor of the Han Dynasty who was responsible for opening the ancient Silk Route linking China with the West. In 110 BCE he ascended Tai Shan to perform the rituals under mysterious circumstances. The single retainer who accompanied him to the top died a few days after the ascent without revealing what transpired there, high in the clouds. Scholars have speculated that Wudi, who had a passionate interest in discovering the secret of immortality, performed a ritual of exorcism designed to transfer life-shortening ills from his own person to that of his loyal attendant. Strongly drawn by something about the sacred mountain, the emperor returned at regular intervals to perform the sacrifices in 106, 102, 98, and 93 BCE. A passage inscribed on a ceremonial mirror two centuries later suggests what it was that Wudi was seeking on the heights of Tai Shan:

> If you climb Mount Tai, you may see the immortal beings. They feed on the purest jade, they drink from the springs of manna. They yoke the scaly dragons to their carriage, they mount the floating clouds. The white tiger leads them . . . they ascend straight to heaven. May you receive a never-ending span, long life that lasts for ten thousand years, with a fit place in office and safety for your children and grandchildren.[16]

Over the centuries a number of emperors followed Wudi's example and ascended Tai Shan to conduct the Feng and Shan sacrifices announcing the success of their dynasties. The last was Zhen Zong of the Song Dynasty, who

climbed the mountain in the year 1008 CE. None of his successors had the confidence in their achievements to perform the powerful rituals: those who considered it changed their minds for fear of provoking calamity through an act of hubris. However, many of them took a deep interest in the sacred peak and visited it for other purposes, such as the construction and renovation of temples. The Emperor Kang Xi of the Qing or Manchu Dynasty came on pilgrimage in 1684 and 1689 and confirmed to his satisfaction that Tai Shan formed the head of a dragon whose body twisted through China, disappearing beneath the land and water to emerge here and there in various mountains, beginning with a range marking its tail in his native land of Manchuria to the north. His grandson, the great Qian Long, was the last emperor to visit the mountain. He climbed it in 1748 and 1771 and, like many of his predecessors, left monuments on the summit of the sacred peak.[17]

Emperors also made it a practice to appeal to Tai Shan for help in times of flood, drought, and earthquakes. They either invoked the mountain from afar or climbed its slopes to make offerings, praying for rain, dry weather, or a stable earth. Their appeals often carried a plaintive tone of reproach, holding Tai Shan personally responsible for restoring the well-being of the Chinese empire, as we can see in the following passage from an imperial petition inscribed on a tablet in the fifteenth century:

> If it is by my faults that I have attracted these calamities, I most assuredly will not refuse personal responsibility; but in so far as it is yours to transform misfortune into happiness, it is truly you, O God [of Tai Shan], who has the duty to apply yourself to it. If there should be a fault of omission and you should not accomplish a praiseworthy act, you would be as guilty as I. If, on the contrary, you transform misfortune into happiness, who will be able to equal you in merit?[18]

The emperors of China regarded Tai Shan as the son of the Emperor of Heaven, from whom they received their mandate to rule. He functioned for them as an important deity deputized to attend to the affairs of this world and to communicate their wishes to the supreme ruler on high. Tai Shan acquired so distinct an official identity that court officials aspiring to high positions in Heaven would actually give dying relatives petitions to convey to him.

As the earthly representative of the Emperor of Heaven, Tai Shan became the greatest of all the terrestrial gods, over whom he ruled through an immense bureaucracy, patterned on that of the human imperial court. In the popular religion of the common people – which drew on Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanistic beliefs and practices – he assumed the role of divine arbiter of life and death. The Chinese believed that the souls of those who died went to a hill at the foot of the sacred mountain. There Tai Shan himself passed judgment on the good and evil a person had done in his or her life. The

expression "going to Tai Shan" became a common euphemism for dying. As the peak of the east endowed with the power of dawn, the mountain was also regarded as the source and shaper of life. Through underlings occupying the maze of offices that made up his massive bureaucracy, Tai Shan determined everything that would happen to a person – birth, position, honors, fortune, and death. Until the Communist Revolution in 1948, every village of any importance had a temple dedicated to the divine ruler of the sacred mountain – and one of the largest and most important temples in Beijing, the Temple of the Eastern Peak, was devoted to his worship.[19]

Because of its great importance in the life of the Chinese people, Tai Shan has a longer record of ascents than any other mountain on earth. The annals tell us that from the mythical times of the legendary origins of the Chinese empire, more than 4,000 years ago, people have been coming to pay homage to the deities of Tai Shan. Emperors and peasants, nobles and serfs, priests and hermits have ascended the sacred slopes to stand in humility and awe beneath the all-encompassing dome of heaven. Perhaps no other mountain has seen and felt the feet of so many pilgrims. Before the Communist Revolution, during the height of the pilgrimage season in March and April, 10,000 a day would climb the peak to express their piety and receive blessings from the countless temples and shrines along the way. Even today, large numbers of Chinese continue to come to Tai Shan, most of them ostensibly to enjoy the mountain as tourists, but the brooding presence of thousands of years of tradition suggests a deeper, religious motivation, of which they may or may not be aware.

The pilgrimage route up Tai Shan passes through a series of three heavenly gates, each marking a transition to a higher and more sacred zone of the mountain. The First Heavenly Gate, a great archway of stone covered with a pagoda roof, marks the beginning of the actual climb. Here the pilgrims leave the gentle world of the plains behind and start up the stairway leading to the rocky heights of heaven. On my way up the mountain, I encountered just beyond this gate a couple of pilgrims engaging in the practice of *qigong*. One of them explained that he was drawing *qi* or energy down into his head from *tian*, heaven or the sky, through his body and feet into the earth, purifying himself and promoting longevity. He held a hand palm out in front of my face, and I felt an extraordinary calm and stability flow into me. I continued up through the Immortal Transforming Arch without recognizing it, and then came back down to pass through it again: Why not take an option on immortality?

Only above the Second Heavenly Gate, halfway up the mountain, does the ascent become truly arduous. After meandering along a pleasant stretch of undulating ground, the path plunges into the Mouth of the Dragon – the entrance to a harsh gorge filled with boulders that twists dragon-like up to the summit plateau. With shaking legs and rasping breath, pilgrims and tourists alike creep up two flights of over 1,000 steps that tumble down from the South

Gate of Heaven, a red arch with a golden roof, set like a ruby in a notch chiseled out of the skyline above. I passed old ladies with bound feet hobbling painfully up the steep staircase with the help of canes. They were on their way to make offerings and pray for grandchildren at the Temple of the Princess of Azure Clouds.

Having hauled myself up to the South Gate of Heaven, I emerged with relief on the Heavenly Way, a wide street-like path running gently past a number of temples and shrines toward the summit itself. It was late in the day, and I stopped there for the night. After dinner I went outside to gaze down at undulating ridges falling away from my feet into darkness speckled far below with the tiny lights of the city of Tai'an far below at the foot of the sacred mountain. I felt like an emperor surveying his realm from on high. But, I hoped, without an emperor-sized ego.

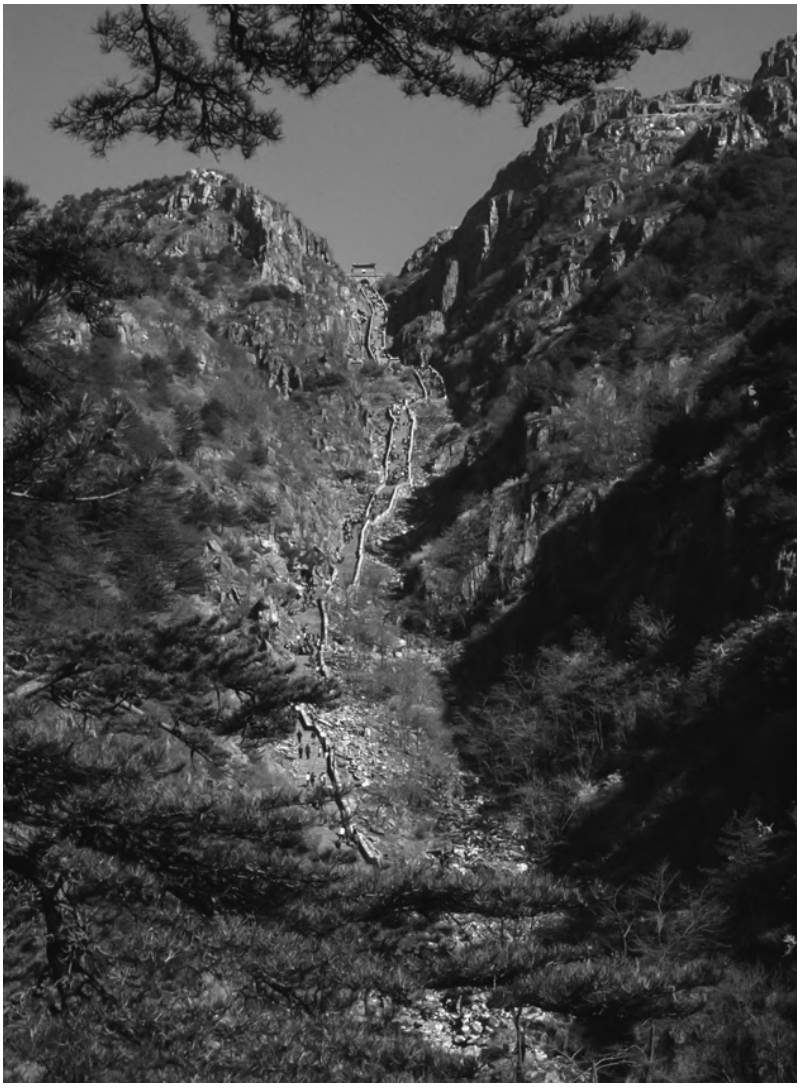


Figure 4 Pilgrims and tourists climbing up a staircase of 7,000 steps through the Dragon's Throat toward the Temple of the South Gate of Heaven on Tai Shan. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

Rising before dawn, I joined crowds of people streaming toward the Sun Viewing Peak. Overhead, through the arches of a temple, stars shone hard and bright, just beginning to fade in a dim purple glow swelling out of the eastern sky. A number of people, including soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, climbed onto the slanting barrel of the Pole Star Pointing Rock to see the dawn. As the sun rose out of mists along the far horizon, its light silhouetted their bodies and exploded in starbursts through their armpits. Above and behind them, the walls of the Temple of the Jade Emperor of Heaven on the highest summit of Tai Shan began to glow a surprisingly fresh and youthful red, belying the great antiquity of the site. I could see why the eastern mountain, closest to the rising sun, source of life, occupied its place of honor in the forefront of all the sacred mountains in China.

On the way back I stopped at the Temple of the Princess of Azure Clouds, a cluster of red buildings with grey-tiled pagoda roofs nestled in a hollow just below the summit. A couple of Daoist monks in signature caps and blue outfits cast suspicious glances at me and disappeared through a heavy door. A group of old ladies, perhaps including the two I had passed on the steep staircase the previous day, were kneeling in front of an altar, burning paper offerings and singing prayers. The Princess of Azure Clouds, the deity to whom they were praying, is the daughter of the god of Tai Shan and the goddess of the dawn, embodying the delicate grace and beauty associated with the birth of each new day. Elderly women whose daughters have been unable to conceive climb up to her temple on top of the mountain to pray for grandchildren – without whom their family lines would die out, a disaster in Chinese culture. Statues of two goddesses stand beside the Princess as attendants in her sanctuary. One heals the eyes of those who have lost their sight, filling their ruined vision with the glory of the morning sun. The other cures children of diseases, infusing their bodies with the healthy vigor of the mountain air.

In the thirteenth century women in quest of the Princess's blessings initiated the practice of climbing Tai Shan as a ritual of popular pilgrimage. Before that time the upper reaches of the mountain had functioned primarily as the preserve of the imperial cult, visited only by a restricted number of people. Many of the female pilgrims who climb Tai Shan today come to burn offerings of paper money before the images of the goddess and her attendants. In 1984 the local authorities tried to ban this practice by stopping elderly ladies at the base of the mountain and confiscating any bank notes they could find in their pockets and purses. The women got around this obstacle by stuffing extra money in the padding of their quilted jackets and proceeding up to the temple, there to continue making offerings for the benefit of their families.[20]

Not far the Temple of the Princess of Azure Clouds, I came to the Platform for Looking at Lu, marking the place where more than 2,000 years ago the sage Confucius stood and surveyed the world below. Literary tradition claims that

he had such sharp eyesight that he was able to pick out a white horse tethered to a city gate on the far horizon. One of his disciples wrote more realistically of the sage's experience:

> Confucius ascended the eastern hill, and the kingdom of Lu appeared to him small. He ascended Tai Shan, and all beneath Heaven appeared to him small.[21]

The view from the heights of the sacred mountain was so awesome that it reduced the human world and all its accomplishments to nothing.

A Chinese couple visiting the site told me that intellectuals and others driven to despair during the Cultural Revolution would come here and throw themselves off the platform. They were following an old tradition. Another precipice on the eastern edge of the summit bears the grim name of "Suicide Cliff." In earlier periods of Chinese history, people would perform the ultimate sacrifice by hurling themselves off its edge. Some chose this course as an expedient way to end their miseries and find instant communion with the Jade Emperor; others used it as a means of expressing filial devotion by offering their lives in exchange for the health and longevity of their parents. In the sixteenth century a local governor attempted to discourage such practices by building a retaining wall and renaming the precipice "the Love of Life Cliff." Four stones with large Chinese characters announced that "it is forbidden to commit suicide." One wonders what possible penalty the state bureaucracy could impose on those who leap beyond the reach of human laws.[22]

On the very top of Tai Shan sits the Temple of the Jade Emperor, the heavenly ruler of this world. Outside this temple stands a blank tablet of stone, its inscription mysteriously effaced – or never written at all. Some say it commemorates the ascent of Qin Shi Huang in the third century BCE, others say that of Han Wudi in the second century BCE. Whichever it may be, the ancient monolith speaks eloquently of the thousands of years of religious and historical tradition imbedded in the rock of Tai Shan. Nearby, a grey pillar set upright upon an altar of weathered stone marks the ancient site where emperors would ascend to perform the Feng sacrifice announcing to heaven the glories of their accomplishments. When a cold wind blows streaks of mist across the summit, it seems to obliterate all memory of their transitory triumphs, now vanished in the ruins of time. A stone railing within the courtyard of the temple encloses the rounded boulder that forms the summit of the sacred mountain. The pagoda roofs that soar above the actual peak reflect the way in which the human spirit has elevated Tai Shan to the highest place, loftier than other mountains whose summits may lie higher above the sea, but farther from heaven.[23]

Whether seeking life or finding death, the people of China have embraced Tai Shan as the sacred mountain most intimately bound up with the hopes and

fears of their everyday lives. A poem composed by the wife of a Chinese general in 400 CE beautifully expresses the deep feelings of mystery and devotion that this peak has inspired over the millennia:

> High rises the Eastern Peak
> Soaring up to the blue sky.
> Among the rocks – an empty hollow,
> Secret, still, mysterious!
> Uncarved, and unhewn,
> Screened by nature with a roof of clouds.
>
> Time and Seasons, what things are you,
> Bringing to my life ceaseless change?
> I will lodge forever in this hollow
> Where springs and autumns unheeded pass.[24]

WUTAI SHAN AND THE FOUR BUDDHIST MOUNTAINS

Partly in imitation of the ancient model of the five principal peaks headed by Tai Shan, the Buddhists of China developed their own scheme of four sacred mountains situated at the four points of the compass: Putuo Shan to the east, Wutai Shan in the north, Emei Shan to the west, and Jiuhua Shan in the south. Mountain sanctuaries that had previously attracted the attention of Daoist hermits became focal points of Buddhist meditation and pilgrimage. Great monastic complexes, some of them rivaling the palace of the emperor in the beauty and magnificence of their art, blossomed on the sites of rustic retreats. Where Buddhist pilgrims in India and Tibet circumambulated holy peaks, such as Mount Kailas, which they treated as stupas and temples, their counterparts in China adopted the indigenous Chinese practice of climbing to the top of sacred mountains, as the emperors did to perform sacrifices on the summit of Tai Shan.[25]

Each of the Buddhist peaks is regarded as the seat of a different Bodhisattva – beings who have dedicated themselves to the task of helping all living creatures attain the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Devout pilgrims seeking aid and comfort amid the miseries of life in this world may meet Guan Yin, the female Bodhisattva of Compassion – or experience her living presence – on Putuo Shan, the mountain of the east. A rocky hill jutting up 932 feet above the surrounding sea, her sacred abode lies on a small island in Zhejiang Province in southeastern China. Originally a male deity known as Avalokiteshvara in India and Tibet, the Bodhisattva changed sex after reaching China, becoming a savior figure endowed with motherly attributes.

Buddhists concerned with the fate of deceased members of their families journey to the southern mountain of Jiuhua Shan, the "Nine Flower

Mountain," which rises to a height of 4,403 feet in Anhui Province. There, in a setting of spectacular peaks reminiscent of the polished pinnacles of Hua Shan, they make petitions to Kshitigarbha, the "Earth Womb" Bodhisattva, who has chosen to descend into the underworld to rescue those who have sinned from the torments of their self-inflicted damnation. The ascent of the mountain, through a labyrinth of gorges and ridges, involves the powerful symbolism of a journey through hell in quest of salvation – for oneself and others.[26]

The highest of the four Buddhist mountains is the western one, Emei Shan. A mountain of awe-inspiring precipices, it rises to 10,167 feet above the fertile basin of Sichuan Province, within sight of the great snow peaks that form the eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau. A series of lesser temples and shrines lead up long, winding paths to the main temple on the summit of the mountain, perched on the top of a cliff. There, Samantabhadra, the "All Good" Bodhisattva rides on a white elephant, performing good works for the benefit of all living beings. Pilgrims climb to the heights of Emei Shan in hopes of obtaining the treasured blessing of seeing the Bodhisattva in the form of the Buddha's Glory – an angelic figure floating within a glorious halo projected onto the mists that sweep up from the valleys far below. When I visited the summit I heard a chorus of shouts from behind me, but when I ran over to join a group of people looking the other way, the ephemeral vision had already faded away into the translucent clouds, leaving behind only the hazy glow of the late afternoon sun.

The first of the four peaks to be established as a Buddhist pilgrimage site, and in many respects the most important, is the northern one – Wutai Shan, the "Five Terrace Mountain." Regarded as the abode of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, its sacred precincts lie hidden in a welter of grassy ranges near Heng Shan in the province of Shanxi. More a mountainous region than a distinct mountain, Wutai Shan encompasses a number of separate peaks. From a maze of mountains that confuse the eye, Buddhists have singled out five with bare, flat-topped summits that look like terraces – hence the name "Five Terrace Mountain." Arranged symbolically in the pattern of a mandala or sacred circle, the peaks bear the names of the four quarters and the center. They range in altitude from the lowest, the Western Terrace, only 8,530 feet high, to the Northern Terrace, the highest at 10,033 feet. Rising like great altars fashioned of rock and earth, the five terraces enclose a grassy plateau of high valleys about 170 miles in circumference. The main valley runs between the peaks for more than ten miles and at one time held, along with its tributary valleys, more than 300 monasteries and temples.

Before Buddhists identified the mountain as the abode of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Daoists regarded Wutai Shan as the dwelling place of immortals and other heavenly spirits. According to a Daoist text,

> The name of Wutai Shan is "Purple Palace." A purple haze constantly emanates from the mountain. Immortals live there.[27]

Along with the haze described in this passage, a number of unusual features attracted attention and set Wutai Shan apart as a sacred place inhabited by divine spirits. Early visitors remarked on the beauty of the flowering meadows and the fact that blossoms appeared even in winter. Others noted a spring of marvelously clear water on top of the Central Terrace that always remained mysteriously full even though no one was able to discern its source. Like tracings of fine brocade, beautiful flowers grew among the stones that shone like crystals in the luminous depths of its clear clean water.

Such features predisposed people to having visions of spiritual beings, whose presence confirmed the sanctity of the mountain. When Wutai Shan became a Buddhist peak, sometime around the sixth century CE, these visions acquired the forms of various manifestations of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. He would sometimes appear to pilgrims as an aged monk of great insight or as a youthful prince seated on a white lion, roaming the ethereal pathways of the sky. At other times he would assume the appearance of rainbow-colored clouds hovering about the summits of the sacred peak or manifest himself in the form of mysterious balls of light floating up the sides of ridges. Such visions became so commonplace that many pilgrims, lay people as well as monks, went to Wutai Shan fully expecting to see Manjushri and to receive blessings and teachings from the Bodhisattva himself.[28]

Manjushri and his mountain had such power because Buddhists regarded – and still regard – him as the embodiment of the highest transcendent wisdom and the blessings that flow from it. The sword that he brandishes in most of his forms represents the sharp awareness that slices through illusion to reveal the ultimate nature of reality. This direct and intuitive wisdom liberates people from ignorance and protects them from evil. Invoking the aid of the Bodhisattva as a protector of the state as well as the individual, the Tang Dynasty emperor Taizong had a temple built in his capital called the "Pavilion of the Great Holy Manjushri for the Protection of the Nation." The power of this protection extended even to the heavens. When a comet appeared in the sky, auguring ill for his rule, Taizong dispatched the tantric master Amoghavajra to Wutai Shan to perform rituals intended to dispel the evil omen. Amoghavajra's success in this undertaking reinforced yet another view of Manjushri as lord of the cosmos, able to liberate people from the baleful influence of the stars.[29]

According to texts from India translated into Chinese, the Buddha prophesied that in the future, when the force of his teachings would be nearly spent, Manjushri would appear as a youthful prince on a five-peaked mountain in China to reinvigorate Buddhism with the spiritual power of his

wisdom. Drawing on such prophecies, Chinese Buddhists in the sixth century identified Wutai Shan as that mountain – the place in the world most conducive to the practice of meditation and the attainment of enlightenment. The first of the Buddhist sacred mountains to be established, it became in the eighth century a major center of Buddhism in China. During the Tang Dynasty, between the seventh and tenth centuries, when Buddhism reached the height of its influence in China, no other peak came close to equaling the importance of Wutai Shan in the eyes of Chinese Buddhists. The great emperors of the period dedicated vast amounts of money to sponsoring monasteries on the sacred mountain – a number of them built on the sites of visions that particular individuals had of magic cloisters inhabited by supernatural monks. Rulers of succeeding dynasties continued to contribute funds for the renovation and support of these monastic complexes. Although in later periods some of the other Buddhist peaks, such as Emei Shan and Putuo Shan, became more popular as places of pilgrimage, none of them ever surpassed Wutai Shan in the magnificence of its monasteries and temples, some of which rivaled in splendor the imperial palaces of the capital itself.[30]

Because of its reputation as the prophesied abode of Manjushri, Wutai Shan became the Chinese mountain of greatest significance for Buddhists outside of China. Tibetans and Mongolians came to regard it as one of the Five Great Places of Pilgrimage, a group that included the most important place in the Buddhist world – Bodhgaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment in India. Before World War II, as a result of the interest the Qing Dynasty took in Tibetan Buddhism, the largest and most active monasteries at Wutai Shan were run by monks from Mongolia and Tibet. During the summer months great processions of lamas in ornate robes would issue from these monasteries, descending a great staircase of 108 steps to wind in lines of dazzling color across meadows of flowers spread between the sacred peaks. Surrounded by thousands of Mongolian and Tibetan pilgrims in native dress, an observer would have to think hard to remember that the pageant he or she was witnessing was taking place in China, rather than Tibet.

Wutai Shan has also occupied a place of great importance for the people of Japan. From the time it became sacred for the Buddhists of China, a number of well-known Japanese pilgrims journeyed to the mountain in search of Buddhist teachings. In a famous episode enshrined in a Japanese No play, one of these pilgrims comes to the foot of Wutai Shan. A magic bridge that can only be crossed with divine assistance leads to the paradise of Manjushri. As the pilgrim watches in awe, the Bodhisattva appears, dancing through a field of flowers in the form of a lion with a mane of red hair forming an aura around his golden face. Ennin, a well-known Japanese monk and traveler who visited Wutai Shan in 840 CE, wrote a detailed description of the mountain in his diary. The

following extract reveals the profound feelings of spiritual equality and respect for all beings that Wutai Shan inspired in him and his fellow pilgrims:

> When one enters this region of His Holiness [Manjushri], if one sees a very lowly man, one does not dare to feel contemptuous, and if one meets a donkey, one wonders if it might be a manifestation of the Bodhisattva. Everything before one's eyes raises thoughts of the manifestations of Manjushri. The holy land makes one have a spontaneous feeling of respect for the region.[31]

Most pilgrims who come to Wutai Shan today focus their attention on the monasteries and temples clustered in the central valley, but a hardy few also climb to the summits of the surrounding peaks, where they have a better chance of witnessing the mysterious phenomenon of globes of light drifting eerily through the night sky – similar in nature, perhaps, to the kind of electrical discharges seen in Saint Elmo's fire. The changeable weather of the sacred mountain, however, can make the ascent of these peaks uncomfortable and even dangerous. In 1986, Raoul Birnbaum, an American scholar doing research on Wutai Shan, became lost in a deadly storm of rain and icy fog that enveloped the peak he was climbing. Only by chance did he and his companion, an elderly monk, find the way to the weather station on the summit and avoid freezing to death in the middle of summer. After they came down from the peak, the head of the Buddhist association at Wutai Shan told Birnbaum that the rain and storm had been Manjushri's way of purifying him by washing out his bad karma.[32]

As places of universal sanctity, rising above the reach of anyone's exclusive grasp, mountains have become associated with ideas and beliefs shared by different traditions in China. The principle of *yin yang*, a concept basic to most systems of Chinese thought, derives from the image of a mountain. The terms *yin* and *yang* originally referred, respectively, to the shaded and sunlit sides of a peak. Over time, through the ideas they called forth, beginning with the images of shadowy valleys and bright summits, these terms came to denote the complementary opposites whose union creates the world – darkness and light, moisture and dryness, female and male, nonexistence and existence. A way to bring order to society in Confucianism and put oneself in harmony with the Dao in Daoism is to balance these opposites in every part of one's life – from the food one eats to the thoughts one thinks.

Mountains also play an important role in *feng shui*, the Chinese system of geomancy that determines the orientation and nature of the place in which one lives. According to this system of belief and practice, which has spread to other countries in East Asia, the form of a hill or peak directs a flow of energy that can influence the atmosphere of the local region, shaping the character and views of its inhabitants. In Korea, for example, Buddhist monasteries have nearby

"host" and "guest" mountains that determine the way they treat their visitors. Tong-do Sa near Pusan has a large host peak and a small guest mountain. The monastery, therefore, has a reputation for being closed to outsiders, regarding them with suspicion and even hostility. The host mountain of Hae-in Sa near the city of Taegu, on the other hand, lies off in the distance and appears very small in comparison with the nearby guest peak, which dominates the view. As a consequence, the monastery welcomes guests with great courtesy, and the monks even treat each other as transient visitors, whose homes lie elsewhere.[33]

Despite official efforts to replace religious with secular values, traditional views of sacred mountains continue to influence the ways in which the Chinese people regard themselves and the land on which they live. When the government relaxed restrictions on the practice of religion at the end of the Cultural Revolution, peasants thronged by the thousands to Tai Shan to give thanks to the mountain. Japanese newspapers in the winter of 1982 reported the bafflement of local officials who after years of Communist rule had never expected such a reaction and did not know how to handle it. According to these reports, they had turned to Beijing for advice on how to deal with the situation, which had become a political problem threatening to undermine confidence in the secular values of the state. The authorities' response seems to have been to try to cover up the resurgence of religious sentiments by encouraging the development of sacred mountains as places of tourism rather than pilgrimage. A cable car built by a Japanese firm now runs to the summit of Tai Shan, making it a major attraction for foreign and local visitors.

Traditional views of sacred mountains have even influenced officially sanctioned thinking about modern mountaineering. When in 1960 Chinese mountaineers succeeded in reaching the summit of Mount Everest, an official account declared, "Summing up our conquest of Everest, we must in the first place attribute our victory to the leadership of the Communist Party and the unrivalled superiority of the socialist system of our country." Along with western ideas about the conquest of nature, these words recall the reason for which the ancient emperors climbed Tai Shan, the most important peak in China – to perform sacrifices bearing witness to the success of their dynasties. Here, as in the past, the ascent of the mountain is an act of sacred politics, declaring to the world the triumph of the current regime.[34]

A passage from a government book describing a subsequent climb of Mount Everest in 1975 made mountain climbing a kind of sacred mission undertaken for the purpose of realizing the highest values and aspirations of the socialist system:

> New China promotes mountaineering as a sport to serve proletarian politics, the interests of socialist economic construction and the building of national defense, to help improve the people's health, and to foster such

> fine qualities in them as wholehearted devotion to the people and the collective, and fearing neither hardship nor death. In the recent expedition to Qomolangma [Mount Everest], the climbers, united as one, helped each other and gave full play to their collective strength.[35]

The ascent of the mountain symbolized the fulfillment of the people's dream: the transformation of China into a paradise of the proletariat.

Although the particular visions they inspire may have changed, mountains continue to awaken a sense of the sacred that for thousands of years has nourished the spirit of the Chinese people and put them in harmony with the world in which they live. The words that a western scholar of Chinese art used to refer to the artist or poet of the past remain true of the worker today: "By climbing the hills and looking out over range upon range of peaks he discovers man's true place in the scheme of things."[36]

THREE

CENTRAL ASIA

The Distant Ranges

North of the Himalayas and the plateau of Tibet, thousands of miles from the nearest ocean, rise the remote and mysterious mountains of Central Asia, shimmering like mirages on the distant horizon. The Kunlun, the Tian Shan, the Pamir, the Altai – ranges whose names conjure up visions of faraway places stretch off in long ridges of snow peaks to waver and vanish in clouds of dust swept up from two of the harshest and most forbidding deserts on earth – the Gobi and the Taklamakan. Older than the Himalayas, but nearly as high, these little-known ranges form some of the most formidable barriers in the world, folded and squeezed up in great walls of metamorphic and sedimentary rock, topped here and there by impregnable towers of granite. Running from east to west across western China and the edge of Central Asia, the Kunlun and the Tian Shan enclose the desiccated heart of the continent – the Tarim Basin, an oval-shaped region filled with the golden dunes of the Taklamakan Desert. The two ranges converge in the Pamir, a tangled complex of valleys and peaks that seals off the western end of this empty basin, on the Chinese border with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. North and east of the Tian Shan, the Altai and other, lesser mountains break the monotony of the Mongolian steppes.

To the south of Mongolia, across the middle of Central Asia, skirting the northern and southern edges of the Tarim Basin, runs the Silk Route, a system of ancient caravan tracks linking China to India and the West. For more than 2,000 years, tenuous lines of oases strung along the feet of the Kunlun and the

Tian Shan have made it possible for merchants, pilgrims, and explorers to undertake some of the longest and most difficult journeys on earth. Starting in the first century CE, Buddhism entered China by way of these oases, populated at the time by Indo-Europeans, Chinese, and other peoples. During the following centuries merchants and missionaries spread the teachings of Nestorian Christianity and Manicheism – a dualistic religion with roots in Zoroastrianism – eastward on the Silk Route. Major centers of learning, many of them organized around meditation caves carved out of cliffs, developed in oases such as Kashgar, Khotan, Turfan, and Dunhuang. In the seventh century the most famous of all Chinese travelers, the monk Xuanzang, followed the Silk Route west on a journey of sixteen years to obtain Buddhist teachings from India. In the account he wrote of the places he visited, he describes the uncanny impressions made by the forbidding deserts and mountains of Central Asia:

> At times sad and plaintive notes are heard and piteous cries, so that between the sights and sounds of this desert men get confused and know not whither they go. Hence there are so many who perish in the journey. But it is all the work of demons and evil spirits.[1]

Impressed by the divine as well as the demonic aspects of the landscape, the Chinese named the great mountain range that runs along the northern rim of the Tarim Basin the Tian Shan or the "Mountains of Heaven."

Just over the Pamir Mountains in the Ferghana Valley of modern-day Kyrgyzstan lies Osh, an ancient caravan center along the Silk Route that in the year 2000 celebrated its 3000th anniversary. In the middle of the city, much like Camelback Mountain in Phoenix, Arizona, rises Sulaiman-Too, a small, but major sacred mountain that draws Muslim pilgrims from all over Central Asia. Many of them come for the healing properties of its rocks. When I hiked the mountain on a project to help preserve its natural and cultural features, a Kyrgyz colleague, Lilia Ten, showed me a hole in the rock for sticking a sore arm all the way in to remove pain and a cave for infertile women to enter in order to become able to conceive children. At another spot we slid down a slide of polished rock said to cure back aches. To draw attention to the need to respect Sulaiman-Too and clean up trash littering the mountain, participants in the project organized a poetry and drama contest of school children broadcast on local television. In one memorable skit, a boy with a long beard hobbled up bent over a cane and slid down a replica of the slide. He straightened up, miraculously cured of his back problems, and did a somersault leading into an exuberant break dance.[2]

In addition to its importance in Islam as a sacred place associated with the prophet Sulaiman in the Qur'an (King Solomon in the Bible), Sulaiman-Too has petroglyphs from the Bronze Age and features that reflect the influence of Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion born in Iran sometime before the fifth century BCE that gave rise to Manicheism and sparked Messianic ideas in

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Lilia pointed out a rock ledge running across a face just below one of five summits of the mountain and said,

> That's known as the "Bridge of Hair," probably coming from the Chinvat Bridge in Zoroastrianism. The soul crosses the bridge at death. If the soul is good, the bridge turns to white stone and the soul goes to heaven. If the soul is bad, the bridge narrows to the width of a hair and the soul falls into hell. People believe today that crossing the ledge will cleanse them of their sins."

Because of its long history and religious and cultural importance, "Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain" was inscribed as an UNESCO World Heritage site in 2009.[3]

Suspended in haze at the limits of the imagination, rising over the mysterious traces of ancient civilizations, the mountain ranges of Central Asia lend themselves naturally to myth and legend. For nearly 1,000 years, the people of Tibet have looked north, in the direction of these distant ranges, for the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, an earthly paradise hidden, like the Tarim Basin, behind a ring of snow mountains. There, in a setting of unmatched splendor and beauty, a line of divine kings is said to be guarding the highest Buddhist teachings for a time in the future when wars will ravage the earth and destroy all true religion outside of Shambhala. Then, according to ancient texts that reflect the influence of Christianity and Islam, a great king, much like the messiah of Judeo-Christian prophecy, will emerge from behind the veil of peaks hiding his

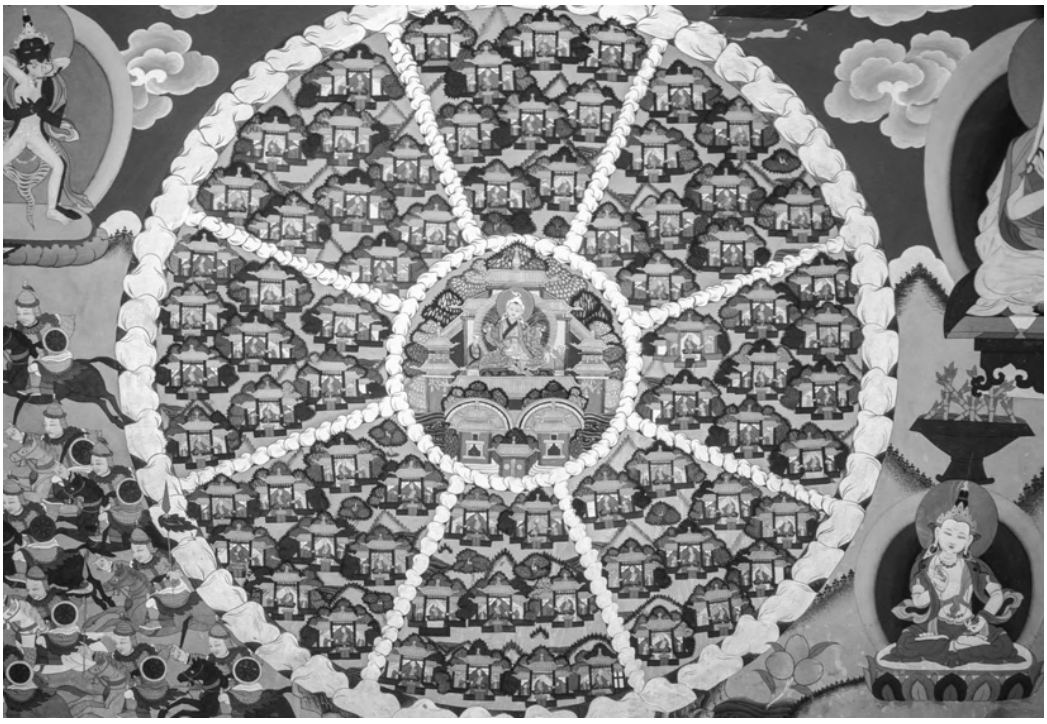


Figure 5 Rings of snow mountains surround the hidden kingdom of Shambhala with the king in his palace at the center. Warriors go forth in the lower left to defeat the forces of evil. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

sanctuary to defeat the forces of evil and establish a golden age throughout the world. Guidebooks written in the Tibetan language describe the way to Shambhala, a long and perilous journey that only yogis endowed with supernatural power and spiritual insight can hope to accomplish. Those who manage to reach the hidden sanctuary will find what they need to attain the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment for the sake of all.[4]

KUNLUN

Of all the mountains in Central Asia, the most remote, desolate and forbidding, as well as the least known, are those of the Kunlun. A system of ranges longer than the Himalayas and nearly as high, its windswept ridges devoid of all but the most tenacious shreds of desiccated vegetation, runs between the icy expanses of the Tibetan Plateau on the south and the arid dunes of the Taklamakan Desert to the north. So barren and hostile are the mountains that even nomads avoid their cold and sterile valleys. The caravan routes that come close to the range skirt its northern edge, jumping from the safety of one oasis to another. Only a few explorers and scientists have ventured into the inner reaches of the Kunlun, where no one lives but the wind – and wild yaks, asses and other animals hardy enough to survive its icy blast. The highest peak of the range, Ulugh Muztagh, 22,877 feet high, was not climbed until 1985, when a Sino-American expedition made the first ascent, backed by the resources of the Chinese army.

According to ancient Chinese tradition, perched on a mythical mountain that rises above the barren heights of the Kunlun lies a magnificent palace of jade surrounded by ramparts of gold. Around the base of this mountain, cutting off all access to ordinary mortals, flows a river with magic waters so insubstantial that they cannot support the weight of a feather. There, high among heavenly peaks hung with gardens of fragrant pine, Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, dwells at ease in the company of Daoist immortals. Beyond the reach of worldly concerns, they pass their days in endless delight, enjoying the purest pleasures of body and spirit. The Chinese *Classic of Mountains and Seas* describes the paradise of Xiwangmu in the following terms:

> There is the country of satisfaction, which satisfies its people. In this place are the Fields of Satisfaction. Phoenix eggs are their food and sweet dew is their drink; everything that they desire is always there.

Beneath the palace, near a magic fountain made of precious stones, grows a tree with the peaches of longevity. Every 6,000 years, when its flowers bear fruit, the immortals gather beside it on the shore of a jewelled lake to celebrate the birthday of Xiwangmu. Regaled with celestial music and song, they dine on such delicacies as bear's paws, dragon's liver, and phoenix marrow and partake of the peaches that enable them to live forever.[5]

In *The Journey to the West,* a famous Chinese novel of the sixteenth century inspired by the travels of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang to India, the peach tree and banquet are transposed to the court of the Jade Emperor of Heaven. In an attempt to quell the main character, a rambunctious monkey who has attained immortality through Daoist practices, the Emperor makes him custodian of the peach tree of longevity. When he discovers that he has not been invited to the party along with the other immortals, he gobbles up all the peaches and ruins the banquet, much to the dismay of Xiwangmu, who has been waiting 6,000 years to celebrate her birthday. Unable to control him with the forces of Heaven, the Jade Emperor finally appeals to the Buddha himself, who imprisons the monkey under a mountain for 500 years. As penance for his sins, he must wait for the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang to appear and then help him follow the Silk Route to India in order to bring the Buddhist teachings back to China.[6]

In the earliest Chinese texts Xiwangmu has nothing to do with the palace of the immortals or the peaches of longevity. She dwells instead on a jade mountain north of the Kunlun and west of the Moving Sands, where she appears in a terrifying human form with a leopard's tail, the fangs of a tiger, and wildly disheveled hair. Rather than bestowing eternal life, she sends epidemics and other calamities to punish people for transgressions against Heaven. Later sources, beginning in the Han Dynasty around the second century BCE, transform her from a hybrid hag into a gracious lady with a white head and a jade comb placed neatly in her hair. A queen of considerable refinement, she entertains visiting emperors with song and conversation, offering them the secret of long life. The transformation of Xiwangmu from an ogress of disease into a goddess of immortality coincides with a shift in the location of her dwelling place from a cave in a mountain to the north, perhaps in the Tian Shan, to a palace on the heights of the Kunlun to the south.[7]

Under the influence of Buddhism, which entered China in the first century CE, the paradise of Xiwangmu on the Kunlun underwent yet another transformation. The mythical mountain, which the ancient Chinese had tended to regard as a cosmic axis, took on the form of a palace with nine levels and became identified with Sumeru, the peak at the center of the Buddhist universe. Partly as a result of interest aroused by the opening of the Silk Route, the mysterious region of Central Asia to the west of China and to the north of India became the exotic setting for a cosmic mountain shared by both civilizations. There, far from the world known to either the Chinese or the Indians, in a mysterious region inhabited by divine and demonic beings, lay the center of the universe and the paradise of the immortals.

Before the introduction of Buddhism, myths about the Kunlun played a role in inspiring the Chinese to look west and open the Silk Route in the second century BCE. Han Wudi, the emperor at the time, was obsessed with

discovering the secret of immortality. He climbed Tai Shan, the sacred mountain of ancient China, in quest of that secret, and his biography claims that Xiwangmu came to his palace to present him with the peaches of longevity from her garden on the heights of the Kunlun. Aware of the Emperor's interest in attaining immortality, Zhang Qian and other envoys dispatched on diplomatic missions to the west went looking for the abode of the goddess, as well as an alliance against the enemies of the Chinese empire, thereby opening the Silk Route. According to later legend, the Emperor commissioned Zhang Qian to find the source of the Yellow River. Sailing upstream, he climbed through the Kunlun and found himself gliding along the Milky Way, where he met a maiden and a cowherd who turned out to be constellations in the sky.[8]

Because of the extreme difficulty in seeing, much less reaching, the Kunlun, James Hilton chose this range, rather than the Himalayas, as the setting for *Lost Horizon*, his famous novel about an idyllic monastery hidden in a remote valley where, like the immortals of Xiwangmu's paradise, people can live for hundreds of years without growing old. Like the kingdom of Shambhala in Tibetan mythology, the purpose of this monastery, called Shangri-La, is to preserve the highest spiritual and cultural treasures for a time in the future when wars will destroy everything of value in the world outside. Then, when the strong have devoured each other, out of this hidden sanctuary will come what is needed to build a new and better world.

Toward the end of the novel one of the characters chases after the hero, who left Shangri-La and is now trying to find his way back to the earthly paradise. He traces him as far as the Kunlun Mountains, which he describes to the narrator of the book in the following conversation:

> "The Government people were quite right – all the passports in the world couldn't have got me over the Kuen-Luns [Kunlun]. I actually went as far as seeing them in the distance, on a very clear day – perhaps fifty miles off. Not many Europeans can claim even that."
>
> "Are they so very forbidding?"
>
> "They looked just like a white frieze on the horizon, that was all."[9]

In 1986 I visited Khotan, a major oasis on the southern branch of the Silk Route, right at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains. The haze of dust churned up from the dunes of the Taklamakan Desert was so thick that I could just barely make out brown hills at the base of the range; of the high snow peaks, where Eastern myth and Western fiction envision an earthly paradise, there was not the slightest trace. The mountains remained as mysterious as they had ever been in the musings of my imagination.

AMNYE MACHEN

At the eastern end of the Kunlun, near the source of the Yellow River, rise the peaks of Amnye Machen. A mysterious massif often hidden in clouds, it lies in a region so remote and difficult to reach that rumors developed in the middle of the twentieth century that it might be higher than Everest. For centuries a fierce group of nomads who preyed on passing caravans kept outsiders away from the sacred peaks of Amnye Machen. Their name, the Golok, means "Those with their Heads Turned Backwards," reflecting their contrary and rebellious nature. Descended from marauding Tibetan warriors of the eighth century, they refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of either the Tibetan or Chinese governments until finally forced to do so by Mao Zedong long after the Communist Revolution in China in 1949.

One of the first Westerners to enter the territory of the Goloks, a hapless Frenchman named Dutreuil de Rhins, was sewn inside a yak skin bag and dumped in the Yellow River to drown. Some thirty years later, in the 1920s, a couple of British and American explorers got close enough to see the mountain in the distance and estimated its summit to be over 29,000 feet above sea level. During World War II pilots blown off course while flying from Burma to China reported sighting a peak more than 30,000 feet high in the vicinity of Amnye Machen. For a brief period of time after the war, sensational accounts in newspapers and magazines convinced many in the West that it was, in fact, the highest mountain in the world. More accurate measurements made by Chinese scientists after the Goloks had been pacified by the Communist government reduced its altitude to a modest 20,610 feet. The Japanese expedition that succeeded in making the first ascent of Amnye Machen in 1981 found the mountain much harder to reach than climb.[10]

Only occasionally visible in short breaks of clear weather, Amnye Machen hovers as an invisible presence over a green plateau of rolling grassland where enormous herds of wild yaks and asses used to roam in the company of bears and snow leopards. Here and there, tucked in the shelter of a ridge or gully, appear the black tents of the Goloks, whose modern rifles, supplied by the Chinese, have decimated most of the local wildlife. When the winds blow away the bluish-grey clouds that usually envelop the sacred massif, they reveal a magnificent view of three peaks composed of pure white snow. The most dramatic, a pyramid to the south, is named Chenrezig, after the Bodhisattva of Compassion and patron deity of Tibet. The highest, a great dome to the north, appears to float like a cloud above the glaciers that issue from its foot. The central peak, which rests serenely between its higher and more impressive neighbors, houses the actual deity of the sacred range – the warrior god Machen Pomra. Tibetan texts describe his mountain abode as a giant reliquary made of crystal with its square base buried deep in the earth, its round body

girded with rain clouds, and its spire reaching into the ethereal zone of the sun and moon.

Paintings on the murals of Tibetan monasteries depict Machen Pomra as a horseman arrayed in golden armor with a spear in one hand and a vessel of jewels in the other. He is accompanied by 360 deities who reside on peaks surrounding his lofty fortress. The Goloks regard him as their principal god and protector. Machen Pomra also acts as the protective deity of Ganden, a major monastery just outside Lhasa, more than 500 miles away from the mountain itself. Tsongkhapa, the fourteenth century lama who founded Ganden and the Gelugpa, or Yellow Hat, sect of Tibetan Buddhism that ruled Tibet under the Dalai Lamas, was born not far from Amnye Machen. When he went to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, he took with him the worship of Machen Pomra. Until the Chinese destroyed Ganden in the 1960s, the monks of the monastery performed elaborate rituals to the god of the distant sacred peak.[11]

Despite the suppression of their religion after the Communist Revolution in 1949, the Goloks still practice ritual circumambulations of the sacred range, much like the pilgrimages made around Mount Kailas in western Tibet. The circuit, which is here much longer, takes at least a week. Ten thousand people a year used to make the pilgrimage, all of them on foot, even the highest chiefs and lamas. In doing so they not only acquired religious merit, which would help them in this life and the next, but they also paid honor to Machen Pomra, the divine lord of the region.

Amnye Machen is also linked with Gesar of Ling, the supernatural hero of the Gesar Epic of Tibetan literature. Many of the legendary events recorded in this national epic, which assumed its present form around the seventeenth century, are supposed to have taken place in the vicinity of the sacred range. Son of a mountain god and a lake goddess, Gesar is born in this region of eastern Tibet to rid the country of demons threatening the Buddhist teachings. After winning a horse race against an evil uncle, he regains the kingdom that is rightly his and goes on to subjugate enemies at the four quarters of the compass, establishing himself as a universal monarch and protector of the Buddhist religion.

More than an epic hero, Gesar is a deity invoked by bards in trances, worshipped in rituals, and depicted in religious paintings. The Goloks call Amnye Machen the "Palace of Gesar" and identify various features of the pilgrimage route around the sacred mountain with his activities. One distinctive rock, for example, is both the place where Gesar tied his horse as well as an embodiment of his younger brother. They believe, moreover, that his sword lies hidden inside the mountain, waiting for him to return in a future rebirth as the king of Shambhala, come to defeat the forces of evil and establish a golden age throughout the world. His name, Gesar, reflects the influence of ideas travelling along the Silk Route: it comes, in fact, from *Kaisar* or *Caesar*, the title

of the emperors of Rome and Byzantium. Passed from ruler to ruler along the caravan routes from the West, this title eventually reached the far end of the Tibetan Plateau, where it came to designate the hero-king of the Tibetan national epic.[12]

BURKHAN KHALDUN

North of Amnye Machen and the Kunlun of eastern Tibet, multitudes of deities and spirits are believed to reside ghost-like in the natural features that dominate the sparsely populated landscape of Mongolia. According to some estimates, the country has 800 or more sacred sites, of which the majority are mountains. The summit of each of these sacred mountains is marked by an *ovoo*, a ceremonial cairn of rocks where people perform rituals and make offerings to the god of the mountain and to Tenger, the supreme deity of the Eternal Blue Sky. They bury their dead high on mountains to entrust them to the gods, close to the heights of heaven. Mongolians hold their mountain deities in such awe that they hardly ever use the name of the deity for which a particular mountain is actually named. Instead they substitute for it a more general, respectful name, such as "The Beautiful," "The Holy," or "The High." In some cases, people have used the substitute for so long that they have forgotten the original name of the mountain.[13]

Northeast of the undulating sea of grass that laps up against the outskirts of Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia, rises Burkhan Khaldun, the most sacred of all Mongolian mountains. Set atop rounded ridges covered with boreal forests of pine and larch, its broad summit stands bare against the open sky, exposed to winds sweeping down from the Siberian taiga to the north and up from the Gobi Desert to the south. Mongolians revere Burkhan Khaldun as the center of the universe and the most sacred place for worshiping the deity of the Eternal Sky. In 1995, by presidential decree, it was designated the official sacred mountain of the Mongolian nation. Only a few select government officials, shamans, and Buddhist lamas are allowed to perform state rituals on the summit of Burkhan Khaldun at the Ovoo of Heaven, a huge mound of stones visible from miles way, holding a pole festooned with blue prayer scarves and crowned with the helmet of an ancient warrior.[14]

Burkhan Khaldun is intimately bound up with the life of Genghis Khan (Chinggis Khan), founder of one of the greatest land empires in history, stretching across Eurasia from the Sea of Japan to the fringes of Western Europe. The future ruler of much of the world was born into a small tribe in 1162 not far from the sacred mountain, which some traditions hold to be the place of his birth as well as the site of his burial. At the age of 21, Temujin, as he was known at the time, fled from enemies trying to kill him and found refuge hiding in the protective embrace of Burkhan

Khaldun, an event that transformed his life and influenced the course of history. The *Secret History of the Mongols* quotes him as saying in a famous proclamation:

> I went up Mount Burkhan,
> Though I was frightened and ran like an insect,
> I was shielded by Mount Burkhan Khaldun.
> Every morning I will offer a sacrifice to Mount Burkhan Khaldun
> Every day I will pray to the mountain
> Let my children and my children's children remember this.

Inspired by his miraculous escape on the mountain, Temujin went on to unite the warring Mongol tribes and embark on a campaign of conquest that earned him the title of Genghis Khan or Universal Ruler. As the official document nominating Burkhan Khaldun as an UNESCO World Heritage site states, "It may be said that the Empire he established and that covered almost all Eurasia began at Burkhan Khaldun Mountain." Mongolians today regard Burkhan Khaldun as the most sacred mountain in Mongolia in large part because Genghis Khan designated it the state and imperial mountain in the thirteenth century, making it an enduring symbol of the Mongolian nation.[15]

MUZTAGH ATA

Beyond the western end of the Kunlun range rises the great white dome of Muztagh Ata, "Father of Ice Mountains," 24,757 feet high. Swelling up from the broad valleys of the Chinese Pamir, it stands alone, like a colossal monument of rock and ice left to commemorate the glories of some forgotten god. Like Mount Kailas in Tibet, Muztagh Ata dominates the surrounding landscape, drawing the eye inexorably to its smoothly rounded summit, set above cliffs of dark stone. When I first saw the mountain, it was in moonlight. A thin veil of silver mist was flowing off its summit so that its highest glaciers appeared to be streaming into the black sky to merge with the stars. Dissolving into the infinite reaches of space, the mountain seemed to belong more to heaven than earth.

When Xuanzang passed through the Pamir, following the Silk Route back from India in 644 CE, he recorded a Buddhist legend that, in the judgement of the Hungarian-British explorer and archeologist Aurel Stein, was inspired by the mysterious and impressive appearance of Muztagh Ata:

> Two hundred *li* or so to the west of the city we come to a great mountain. This mountain is covered with brooding vapors, which hang like clouds above the rocks. The crags rise one above another, and seem as if about to fall where they are suspended. On the mountain top is erected a *stupa* of a wonderful and mysterious character.[16]

According to the story heard by Xuanzang, one day the mountain opened up to reveal an ancient Buddhist monk seated within it, immersed in meditation. A hunter happened to see him and told the king about the extraordinary sight. When the people came to awaken the monk from his trance, he rose up in the air and passed into Nirvana, leaving his bones behind. The king and his monks build the *stupa* over them – a hemispherical monument used to honor the relics of Buddhist saints. Linking the story to Muztagh Ata, Stein points out that "it is certain that the remarkable shape of the huge dome of ice rising above all other mountains must have vividly suggested to Buddhist eyes the idea of a gigantic Stupa."[17]

Even though the Kirghiz came to the region in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, long after Buddhism had given way to Islam, they seem to have picked up a survival of this pre-Islamic tradition and adapted it to their own beliefs, inspired by feelings of reverence for the sacred peak. When Stein visited the mountain in 1900, the Kirghiz told him what he took to be a Muslim version of the original Buddhist legend: a story of hunters who long ago beheld a Muslim sage residing on the inaccessible summit of Muztagh Ata. Local beliefs collected around the same time by Sven Hedin reinforce Stein's conclusions. According to the Swedish explorer, the Kirghiz regard the mountain as the gigantic tomb or shrine of seventy saints, the two most important being Moses and Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. They believe that the soul of Moses dwells within Muztagh Ata, which they also call, in his honor, Hazrett-i-Musa, the "[Shrine of] Moses." As for Ali, the legend goes that when he lay dying, murdered by his enemies, he prophesied that a white camel would descend from heaven to carry him away. As soon as he breathed his last, the camel appeared and flew with him on its back to the snows of Muztagh Ata, where his soul now rests in peace.[18]

The Kirghiz also revere the mountain as a symbol of paradise. According to one of their legends, on the summit of Muztagh Ata, hidden in its snows, lies the ancient city of Janaidar, built thousands of years ago in a time of universal peace and happiness. When strife and misery broke out below, the people of Janaidar withdrew from all contact with the outside world. There, they have preserved the peace and happiness that humankind knew at the beginning of creation. Delicious fruit of all kinds grows all year round, and flowers do not fade; death, cold, and darkness have been banished forever. The paradise that the Kirghiz see on the summit of their sacred mountain carries echoes of the golden age described in the Biblical legend of the Garden of Eden, preserved for them in the Muslim scriptures of the holy Qur'an.

A story the Kirghiz told Hedin may reflect the influence of the ancient Chinese myth of the peach tree of longevity on the heights of the Kunlun. According to this account, an aged Muslim holy man wandered by himself up the mountain. High on its slopes, he came across a beautiful lake with a white

camel grazing on its shore. Near it was a garden of plum trees, where old men dressed in white were walking to and fro. The holy man plucked a plum, which he ate with relish. One of the old men immediately came over to congratulate him for having eaten the fruit. "If you had despised the plums, as they all did," he said, pointing to his aged companions, "you would have been condemned to stay on this mountain like them, walking to and fro, until the end of time." Whereas in the Chinese myth of the Kunlun, the magic fruit grants the Daoist sages immortality, here it saves the Muslim holy man from a pointless life of eternal boredom.[19]

Because of its isolated position and striking appearance, Muztagh Ata attracted the attention of a number of Western explorers and mountaineers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each one of these travelers, whether or not a mountaineer, tried, without success, to climb Muztagh Ata. Sven Hedin, the most daring and flamboyant of these Westerners, was the first to try. In 1894, in the course of one of his many harrowing expeditions across Central Asia, he made four attempts on the peak. On his first attempt, he reached its glaciers only to succumb to snow blindness. Figuring the best way to deal with the problems of high altitude was to avoid exertion, he tried on his next two attempts to ride yaks to the summit, but the poor beasts got bogged down in soft snow and crevasses. Obsessed with a longing to reach the summit, he came back yet again, but this time the mountain simply brushed him off with a flick of wind and snow.

Aurel Stein also tried to climb Muztagh Ata. Following Hedin's lead, he attempted to ride a yak up to the summit, but soon realized the folly of the enterprise: "more and more frequently we had to dismount and drag the stubborn animals out of the deep snow-drifts into which they had plunged." Leaving the unhappy yaks behind, he proceeded on foot to his high point at 20,000 feet, still almost 5,000 feet from the top. Like Hedin he remarked on the religious awe in which the Kirghiz held the sacred mountain.[20]

Nearly fifty years later, in 1947, two experienced mountaineers tried to climb Muztagh Ata – Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman. Although Muztagh Ata presented no technical difficulties, the endless rise of its upper slopes, combined with wind and extreme cold, forced them to give up not far from the summit. The mountain was finally climbed in 1956 by a Sino-Soviet expedition that put thirty-one climbers on top, all at the same time, to demonstrate the supremacy of the Communist doctrine. A more unusual climb took place in 1980, when three Americans – Galen Rowell, Jan Reynolds, and Ned Gilette – reached the summit and then made a heavenly descent on skis, soaring down fields of golden powder, floating above a darkened world in the last light of the setting sun.[21]

More than other mountains, the distant ranges of Central Asia by their very nature and location inspire a sense of the sacred as the mysterious other, remote

and apart from the familiar world of everyday life. Cultures of both East and West have turned to these little-known ranges in quest of earthly paradises impossible to reach or attain by ordinary means – the hidden kingdom of Shambhala, the cosmic axis of Mount Sumeru, the palace of Xiwangmu, the monastery of Shangri-La. The mountains that conceal such sanctuaries – the Kunlun, the Tian Shan, the Pamir, and others – represent the extreme limits of the physical world, the borders between the possible and the impossible, the known and the unknown, the imaginable and the unimaginable. Their remoteness and inaccessibility are a measure of their power to evoke the ultimate mystery of the sacred.

Despite the fact that it lies beyond our reach, or perhaps because it does, something deep within us yearns to experience that mystery, to find ourselves transported outside the boundaries of the world we know. We sense that in the strange and distant place symbolized by the palace of the immortals or the monastery of Shangri-La is hidden the answer to our deepest longings – a secret sanctuary so far and so close that we have great difficulty recognizing it, much less reaching it. Yet seek to reach it we must – or spiritually wither and die. A Tibetan story tells of a young man who sets off across the ranges of Central Asia in search of Shambhala. After traversing many deserts and mountains, he comes upon an old hermit in a cave. The sage asks him, "Where are you going across these wastes of snow?"

"To find Shambhala," the youth replies.

"Ah, well then, you need not travel far," the hermit says, "The kingdom of Shambhala is in your own heart."[22]

FOUR

JAPAN

Mountains of the Rising Sun

Emerging from the eastern rim of the Pacific Ocean, the islands of Japan rise up to form one of the most mountainous countries in the world. There is hardly a place on their rugged surface from which the prominent outline of a peak or hill cannot be seen. Japan abounds with mountains of all kinds: elegantly shaped volcanoes sweeping up from low-lying plains, gnarled crags of rock lunging out of the sea, ranges of alpine peaks serenely tipped with crystal snows, long massifs of twisting ridges softened with covers of green forest. The subterranean forces that created these mountains, giving the country its distinctive character, continue to shape and shake the islands. Steam and gases seethe out of the cauldrons of volcanoes, and the land frequently quivers in response to the unseen collision of tectonic plates. The overwhelming power of the earth, made visibly manifest in the mountainous landscape, imbues human life with a fragile beauty reflected in the delicacy of Japanese art and culture.

Living in close proximity to them, knowing them almost as members of the family, the Japanese have developed a special affection for their mountains. A passage from a well-known scripture by Dogen, the founder of an important school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, reveals the depth of this affection and the sense of intimate relationship it expresses:

> Although we say that mountains belong to the country, actually they belong to those who love them. When the mountains love their master,

> the wise and the virtuous inevitably enter the mountains. And when sages and wise men live in the mountains, because the mountains belong to them, trees and rocks flourish and abound, and the birds and beasts take on a supernatural excellence.[1]

Of all the features of the natural landscape, the Japanese have tended to regard mountains as the most sacred – the places most intimately associated with the gods. Intricate networks of shrines and pilgrimage routes bear witness to the devotion they have lavished on an incredible number of hills and peaks. According to one authority, Japan has 354 major sacred mountains – to say nothing of the minor ones, which remain uncounted.[2]

The Japanese reverence for mountains has its origins in *sangaku shinko* or "mountain faith," a loose collection of beliefs and rituals practiced by prehistoric hunters, woodcutters, and farmers whose ancestors migrated to the islands from the Asian mainland as early as 10,000 BCE. When Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, emerged as a unified tradition sometime before the Japanese began writing down their history in the sixth century CE, it pulled these practices together in the veneration of prominent peaks as major abodes of the *kami* or spirits believed to animate rocks, trees, and other features of the natural world. The observance by the general populace of the ancient tenets of *sangaku shinko* led to them to revere mountains in various ways. Farmers and villagers worshipped local hills and peaks, such as the ones around Kyoto, as sources of fertility. They regarded them as the abodes of the *yama no kami*, the "mountain spirits" who would descend during the spring and summer to become the rice *kami* of the fields, bringing with them the life-giving streams that issued from the moist and cloudy heights. Hunters and woodcutters who roamed the forested slopes of these mountains revered them as the dwellings of somewhat wilder *kami* on whose favor they depended for a plentiful supply of game and wood.

Certain mountains, such as Gassan in northern Honshu, were viewed as hallowed places of the dead. There, at the entrance to the other world, the souls of the deceased underwent a process of purification that transformed them into the mountain *kami* on whom their offspring depended for sustenance in this life. In accordance with such beliefs, the burial mounds of ancient emperors assumed the suggestive form of hills. The mausoleums of later Japanese rulers were actually called *yama*, or "mountains." The person in charge of building such a tomb bore the title of "the official who erects the mountain." Even today, in parts of rural Japan, people call a coffin "the mountain box" and the process of digging a grave "mountain work." At the start of a funeral procession, the leader cries out, "*Yama-yuki*! *Yama-yuki*! – We go to the mountain."[3] The summit of Tateyama, one of the highest peaks in the Japanese Alps, is

regarded as the doorway to hell, from which the dead occasionally emerge for a brief escape from their sufferings.

Japanese venerated other mountains as the dwellings of gods who descended from heaven. Many of the peaks in this category, such as Mount Fuji, possess the distinctive form of isolated cones, both symmetric and irregular. The people believed that mountains of such a shape caught the attention of heavenly deities, who would step down from the sky to alight on their summits. Over the centuries, hunters, shamans, and hermits were drawn to these peaks to make contact with the gods and spirits who could give them the supernatural powers needed to hunt, heal, and meditate. In a modern continuation of such practices, artists and actors from Tokyo go to Mount Ontake to put themselves in trances as a means of obtaining divine inspiration for the creative aspects of their work.[4]

In the prehistoric period before the sixth century, the Japanese did not climb their sacred mountains, which were regarded as a realm apart from the ordinary world, too holy for human presence. The people built shrines at their feet and worshipped them from a respectful distance. With the introduction of Buddhism from China in the sixth century came the practice of climbing the sacred peaks all the way to their summits, there to commune directly with the gods and the divine reality they embodied. The development of this favorable attitude toward the heights also drew inspiration from Chinese Daoist practices of seeking freedom and immortality in the highest and wildest reaches of the mountains – the craggy ridges and cloud-hung summits where immortals took delight in living in harmony with the Dao.

Buddhists, in particular, regarded the higher parts of mountains as the perfect setting for the practice of meditation. There in the peaceful solitude of forest and stream, monks might develop the tranquility of mind needed to penetrate into the mysterious nature of ultimate reality. The two great monastic centers responsible for the early propagation of Buddhism in Japan, especially within imperial circles, were founded on top of sacred mountains: the center of the Tendai sect on Mount Hiei, just above Kyoto, and the seat of the Shingon school on Mount Koya, several days' walk southeast of the city. Monasteries of the meditation school of Zen Buddhism, which became popular later, were called "mountains," titles which they have retained to this day. Dogen, the thirteenth-century founder of the Soto sect of Zen, composed an influential work extolling mountains and rivers in which he wrote, "From time immemorial the mountains have been the dwelling place of the great sages; wise men and sages have all made the mountains their own chambers, their own body and mind."[5]

THE MOUNTAIN CLIMBING RELIGION OF SHUGENDO

Whereas the orthodox schools of Buddhism found the mountains a congenial environment for pursuing meditation, a new and fascinatingly eclectic sect

arose that made mountain climbing itself the focus of its doctrine and ritual practice. Shugendo, which emerged in the period between the ninth and twelfth centuries, blended shamanistic practices of Shinto and *sangaku shinko* with doctrines of Buddhism and Daoism to produce a tradition unique in the religious landscape of the world. The name *shugendo* means "the way of mastering ascetic powers." The practitioners of this sect are called *shugenja* or *yamabushi*, "those who lie down or sleep in the mountains." They look to mountain peaks as places to obtain supernatural powers that they can bring down to the world below. There, on the heights, they practice austerities and rituals designed to purify themselves and make contact with the deities who can grant them such powers – the old *kami* of the Shinto tradition transformed into the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of esoteric Buddhism.

Shugendo practices center on the ritual ascent of sacred mountains. As a means of purifying and strengthening themselves for the influx of supernatural powers, many *yamabushi* begin their climb by standing under icy waterfalls at the foot of the peak they intend to ascend. Then, dressed in puffy pants with cup-like hats on their foreheads, colorful pom poms on their chests and backs, and bearskins hanging over their rear ends to protect them when they sit to meditate, they go up the mountain, stopping at certain places to undergo various trials and perform rituals that involve the recitation of mantras or sacred spells to call forth the powers of deities. As they climb toward the summit, they visualize themselves passing through the stages leading to enlightenment.

Not far from Kyoto, on a wooded mountain ridge lies Yoshino, an important Shugendo sacred mountain and Japan's most famous place for cherry blossoms. According to tradition, the legendary founder of the sect, En no Gyoja, a wild ascetic who possessed the nature and appearance of a wizard, came to meditate here in the seventh century and carved an image on cherry wood of Zao Gongen, a major Shugendo deity combining Buddhist and Shinto attributes. Because of this tradition, over the centuries people have planted cherry trees all around Yoshino, and when the flowers blossom in the spring, massive glaciers of pink and white appear to emerge and flow down the sides of the sacred mountain. Kimpusenji, the second largest wooden temple in Japan, enshrines the site with a huge image inside of Zao Gongen, hair standing on end, flames flaring around his wrathful blue face.

A pilgrimage route leads nineteen miles from Yoshino to the summit of Mount Omine – one of the most important sacred mountains of the Shugendo tradition. When I climbed the mountain with two Japanese colleagues, we passed a couple of *yamabushi* running back down wooden stairs on a steep part of the path. After talking to them, one of my companions said to me, "The taller one is very famous. He has climbed Omine from Yoshino a thousand times over a period of nine years. He goes up and down in just one day, walking

sixty kilometers [nearly forty miles] each time. We are very lucky to have met him!"

Higher up, where the route steepens, we used chains with iron links to help us up rock slabs to the base of one of the ritual trials on Omine – the ascent of a cliff going up over an overhang with a ceremonial rope hanging across the lower part, barring the way to all but *yamabushi*, or "mountain people," as my companions called them. We went around the overhang and proceeded along a ridge to the site of the most terrifying trial on the sacred mountain – the top of a precipice plunging straight down 200 feet. In the old days *yamabushi* would hang each member of their party by his ankles, head down, over the edge to contemplate the transient nature of all things and to repent of the evil he had done in his life. If the unfortunate climber was known to have really bad karma, they would release their hold and let him fall to his death on the rocks below. My companions showed me a thick rope used by *yamabushi* today to wrap around the shoulders and safely secure each person hung upside down over the cliff. Not far from there, at the high point, a weathered rock on the very summit marks the spot where En no Gyoja had a vision of Zao Gongen, the deity bestowing spiritual power and enlightenment on those making the ritual ascent of the sacred mountain.

A sign at the start of the climb of Mount Omine reads in Japanese and English:

> "No Woman Admitted"
> Regulation of this holly [sic] mountain
> Ominesan prohibits any woman
> from climbing farther through
> this gate according to the
> religious tradition
>
> – Ominesanji Temple

Omine is one of the few mountains left in Japan to have a prohibition that bars women from climbing it – and the only one in the country included in a UNESCO World Heritage site. This has raised contentious issues since World Heritage sites are supposed to be of outstanding universal value for all of humanity, not just the male half. While I went up Omine, my wife climbed Inamura, the neighboring women's mountain – fittingly, some fifteen feet higher than the men's mountain.[6]

The ritual ascent of Mount Haguro, another mountain important to modern-day Shugendo, involves powerful symbolism of death and rebirth. On reaching a hut high on the side of the peak, the *yamabushi* sequester themselves inside its dark interior and imagine themselves dying and entering the womb of the mountain itself. Red and white cords hanging from the beams symbolize arteries and veins running through the new body each will

receive. On the last night of the ritual, the *yamabushi* burn logs representing the bones of their old bodies, turning to ashes all remnants of their passions and illusions. The next morning as they descend the peak, they squat in fetal positions and jump up with a sharp cry, symbolizing the ecstatic moment of rebirth from the mountain – and the entrance into a new and more spiritual life leading to the ultimate goal of enlightenment itself.

In the past the *yamabushi* who acquired ascetic powers in this manner on mountains sacred to Shugendo traveled to villages throughout Japan, bringing blessings to the people, often in the concrete form of amulets charged with magic forces believed capable of improving the conditions of life in this world. During the medieval period, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, many of these wandering ascetics settled down to become village priests devoted to helping the community worship a particular mountain in the local vicinity. Spreading in this manner, Shugendo became the predominant form of religion for the common people of Japan, an underground network of folk beliefs and practices anchored to the mountains as the source of sacred power and blessings.

The practice of Shugendo came to an abrupt end in 1868 when the nationalistic Meiji Restoration overthrew the feudal rule of the preceding Tokugawa period and forcibly separated Buddhism from Shinto in order to make the latter the state religion of Japan, free from the contamination of foreign Buddhist teachings from China. Too inextricable a blend of Buddhist and Shinto elements, Shugendo fit neither category and was therefore banned. Only after the end of World War II, when Japanese nationalism fell into disgrace and freedom of religion was established as a constitutional right, did its practice revive. Today *yamabushi* continue to climb Haguro, Omine, and other sacred peaks of Shugendo, but they represent only a ghostly remnant of a vast and pervasive sect that once spread the power and authority of holy mountains throughout the islands of Japan.[7]

The power attributed to mountains and those who climb them, dating back to the origins of Shugendo, helps to explain the keen interest that the Japanese take in the modern sport of mountaineering. On weekends during the right time of the year, thousands of climbers dressed in boots and knickers take commuter trains out of Tokyo to scramble over the peaks and ridges of the Japanese Alps. A national passion for mountains and mountaineering has inspired an increasing number of Japanese to seek out more distant ranges such as the Himalayas. In 1975 Junko Tabei, an interpreter and teacher from a suburb of Tokyo, became the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest. On a visit to Japan in 1978, I saw a billboard in the Ginza, the commercial center of downtown Tokyo, announcing a successful Japanese ascent of K2, the second highest mountain in the world. It would be hard to imagine such a billboard in Piccadilly Circus in London or Times Square in New York.

MOUNT FUJI

The mountain that represents Japan in the eyes of the world is, of course, Mount Fuji. No peak more beautifully embodies the spirit of a nation – the ideals and aspirations that motivate an entire people. The elegant simplicity of its lines, sweeping up into the graceful shape of an inverted fan painted with delicate patterns of pure white snow, symbolizes the quest for beauty and perfection that has shaped so much of Japanese culture, both secular and sacred. Suspended between heaven and earth, neither rock nor cloud, the volcano appears as a cone of crystallized sky, floating above a vast landscape of fields, villages, lakes, and sea. On a clear day, when smog clears and the world seems fresh and new, its symmetric outline can be seen from the city of Tokyo, sixty miles away. The very perfection of its form, startling in its incredible simplicity, suggests the mystery of the infinite.

Innumerable poets and painters have attempted to depict the divine beauty of Mount Fuji. A famous poem from the *Manyoshu*, the oldest collection of Japanese poetry, compiled in the seventh century CE, describes the mountain in the following words:

> Lo! There towers the lofty peak of Fuji
> From between Kai and wave-washed Suruga,
> The clouds of heaven dare not cross it,
> Nor the birds of the air soar above it.
> The snows quench the burning fires,
> The fires consume the falling snow.
> It baffles the tongue, it cannot be named
> It is a god mysterious.[8]

Although many authors and artists have tried to capture the spirit of Fuji, no one has ever completely succeeded. Something about the mountain, the mystery of its sublime perfection, evades the stroke of pen and brush. As one modern Japanese critic has said, "The reason why there are curiously few fine poems in Japanese or Chinese, or fine paintings about Fuji, is that the subject is too overpoweringly splendid."[9]

Although the sight of Fuji may inspire thoughts of eternal beauty, the mountain itself was created quite recently. Much younger than most Japanese mountains, it burst forth from the earth only 25,000 years ago when an eruption buried the surrounding plain beneath ten feet of volcanic ash. The cone we see today assumed its general form about 8000 BCE, but the mountain continued erupting over the succeeding millennia, growing to its present altitude of 12,388 feet. A composite volcano, Fuji owes its graceful shape to alternating layers of ash and lava that have given its smoothly rising slopes the internal structure and strength to withstand the forces of upheaval and erosion. Nine eruptions convulsed the peak between 781 and 1083 CE

alone. The mountain last shot forth fire in 1707 when ash swirled up to drift down on Edo – modern-day Tokyo. Although the volcano's eruptions have brought destruction and death through the centuries, they have created the beautiful landscape of forests and lakes that surrounds the sacred mountain like the garden of an earthly paradise. Some of the most unusual features of this landscape, now a national park interspersed with small towns, are networks of hollow tubes formed by flows of lava. Religious tradition has associated these tunnels and caves with the womb of the mountain, giving the volcano a distinctly female character.

The name of Fuji comes from an aboriginal word meaning "Fire" or "Deity of Fire." A god of great power, the mountain had to be placated. In 806 a local official built a shrine near the foot of the volcano to keep it from erupting. The priests assigned the task of pacifying the mountain apparently neglected their duties because Fuji erupted with great violence in 864, causing much damage in a nearby province. The governor of that province blamed them for failing to perform the proper rites and constructed another shrine in his own territory, where he could make sure everything was done correctly. The fiery god of the mountain became, at a later date, the more peaceful Shinto goddess of Mount Fuji – Konohana Sakuya Hime, the "Goddess of Flowering Trees." Today she is worshipped at the shrine originally built for the older deity.[10]

A romantic story, attributed to the fifth century, explains the eruptions of the volcano after its emergence. One day an old couple with no children found a beautiful baby girl in a bamboo grove near the foot of Mount Fuji. They named her Kaguya Hime, or "She who lights up the area." The girl grew up to become the most beautiful woman in the region, attracting the attention of the local governor, who made her his wife. After a number of years of blissful marriage, she told her husband that she was, in fact, the Immortal Lady of Mount Fuji and that she was returning to the Palace of the Immortals on top of the sacred mountain. To alleviate his distress, she gave him a magic mirror in which to see her image, and then she vanished. Unable to bear life without her, he followed her up to the crater of Fuji. Finding no trace of her and having nowhere else to go, he clutched the mirror to his breast and leapt off a precipice. The love that burst from his heart set fire to the mirror, and the smoke that rose from it is the smoke that used to issue from the summit of Fuji itself. A famous verse from the twelfth century commemorates the sublimity of the official's love for the goddess of the sacred mountain:

Trailing down the wind
The smoke of Fuji
vanishes into space
till nothing lingers
of my love's deep fires.[11]

Regarding the volcano from a different perspective, Buddhists came to view Fuji as the abode of a Buddhist deity who embodied the divine light of spiritual wisdom. According to a story recorded in a text of esoteric Buddhism, Shotoku Taishi, a famous prince of the sixth century, went to the summit and descended through the crater into the mountain itself. There, in a vast cavern deep within the volcano, he spied a fire-breathing dragon coiled around a rock in the middle of a pond. When he addressed the supernatural creature, it turned into Dainichi Nyorai, the Buddha of All-Illuminating Wisdom, and said, "I have come from the empty and limitless realm of ultimate reality to live forever in the cave palace of this peak in order to save all sentient beings." In the twelfth century a Buddhist priest named Matsudai Shonin climbed the mountain and built on its summit a temple dedicated to Dainichi Nyorai – henceforth identified with Sengen Dainichi or Sengen Daibosatsu, the Buddhist deity of Mount Fuji. His ascent marks the first historically attested ascent of the volcano.[12]

Impressed by its purity of form and extraordinary height, Buddhists found in Fuji a sublime symbol of meditation. The word they used to describe its summit, *zenjo*, is a Buddhist term for the flawless state of perfect concentration. Just as the peak of a mountain soars above the mists that gather in the valleys below, so a person in meditation rises above the passions and illusions that obscure the vision of ordinary people. The Japanese say of Fuji that the clouds that cover the tops of other peaks only wind about Fuji's foot. Its summit, a lofty place of contemplation, provides an attractive sanctuary for the gods, who dwell there free from the sorrows that trouble the world below.

According to Shugendo tradition, the founder of their religion, En no Gyoja, made the first ascent of Mount Fuji around 700 CE. Having offended important officials with the indiscriminate display of his magic powers, he was exiled to the Izu Peninsula. Legend tells us that every night he would step across the sea to climb to the summit of Fuji. Whether En no Gyoja actually climbed the mountain, sometime around the fourteenth century Shugendo practitioners who counted themselves as his followers established a climbing route up the southern flank of Fuji, the side with the mildest weather. These *yamabushi* would lead parties of pilgrims up to the summit, stopping to purify themselves in ritual baths of icy water at the start of the climb. In the fifteenth century they began to build huts high up on the mountain for the use of religious mountaineers. A record dated from 1518 tells us that "thirteen persons met their deaths at the summit during a storm and a bear killed three climbers."[13]

The *yamabushi* effectively controlled all access to the summit of the peak until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when followers of Fuji-do, a new religion devoted to Fuji, began climbing the mountain from the north. Hasegawa Kakugyo, a remarkable ascetic revered as the founder of Fuji-do, was

drawn to Fuji around 1560 by a visionary dream in which En no Gyoja commanded him to go to the mountain. There he took up residence in a sacred cave, where he spent most of his life practicing austerities, most notably splashing himself with icy water and standing for hours without moving on a tiny square of wood. Out of such practices and the ascent to the summit of the mountain, he gained spiritual powers and insights that allowed him to formulate a new religious doctrine centered around his own conception of Sengen Dainichi, the Buddhist deity of Mount Fuji, as the one supreme god, creator and sustainer of all things. Although Japanese had worshipped sacred mountains for centuries, no one had ever elevated a particular peak to such a rank of divine preeminence over all others.

During his lifetime Kakugyo attracted only a small band of followers devoted to the worship of Fuji. One of his successors, Jikigyo Miroku, however, transformed the relatively minor cult of Fuji-do into a major religious movement that eventually threatened the established social order of Japan. About forty years after the death of Kakugyo, he became a devotee of Fuji at an early age and made it a practice to climb the peak at least once a year. On one of these ascents, he had an overpowering vision of Sengen Dainichi, whom he saw as a deity no longer identified with Buddhism. The experience so moved him that he abandoned his old life and became an inspired teacher, proclaiming the advent of a messianic era of peace and plenty in which people would abandon the worship of false deities and devote themselves to helping each other.

According to Jikigyo's teaching, in the beginning only Mount Fuji existed in a sea of mud: two primordial gods, the Precious Parents, emerged from the womb of the sacred mountain to give birth to Sengen, a supreme deity who transcended all established religions, including Buddhism. Unfortunately, the people of Japan turned away from this deity to worship Buddhas and other illusory deities, who were only creations of their own minds. Jikigyo prophesied, however, that Sengen was coming to dispel these false gods and establish himself as the divine ruler of the world. He taught that simple faith in the god of Fuji would make people honest, diligent, happy, and prosperous. Drawing on another name for the peak as Kokushuzan, "the Mountain of Heaped-up Grain," Jikigyo proclaimed Sengen to be the divine embodiment of food, the universal deity who would finally rid the world of starvation.

In another vision the god of Fuji had conferred upon Jikigyo the title of Miroku, the Japanese name of the Buddha prophesied to bring about a messianic era in the future. Feeling that through his devotions to the sacred mountain he had become one with Sengen, Jikigyo decided that by offering his body as a physical manifestation of the deity he could feed the world and initiate the golden age to come. In 1733, in an effort to end a famine wasting Japan, he climbed up the peak, entered a portable shrine beneath the summit, and fasted to death. His dramatic self-sacrifice inspired thousands to respond to his call and

begin climbing Fuji. The Fuji-do cult swelled into Fuji-ko, a large movement that appealed to tradespeople and laborers. By casting aspersions on the present time and looking forward to a golden age in the future, the messianic teaching they espoused implicitly criticized the established feudal order, and authorities from the ruling nobility tried to suppress the movement, only to find new groups popping up to replace the ones that had vanished. The power of the sacred mountain now threatened to burst forth in social and political, as well as physical, eruptions of devastating magnitude. The only solution was to co-opt Fuji-ko by incorporating it as part of a growing movement toward Japanese nationalism.

When Kakugyo, the founder of Fuji-do, had stood immobile in his cave inside Mount Fuji, he had been trying through his meditation to restore stability to a nation rocked by political and social unrest. He hoped in this way to transfer the calm serenity of the mountain to the people of Japan, who had been fighting among themselves in an endless series of civil wars. Legend has it that he conferred this stabilizing power on Tokugawa Ieyasu, the military ruler who finally unified the warring factions of the country in 1600. Drawing on Kakugyo's action as a precedent, a Fuji-ko leader in the nineteenth century combined the emerging cult of the emperor with the practice of worshipping Fuji. Shibata Hanamori taught that the peak was, in fact, the very foundation of national security. Through devotion to emperor and mountain, a new age of salvation would come in which Japan would reign supreme over all the earth. A Japanese scholar of art wrote at the beginning of World War II, "the soaring of Mount Fuji above other volcanic mountains and its majesty characterizes the potential power of the Japanese people as a nation." After the defeat of Japan, disillusionment with the disastrous consequences of such nationalistic ideas led to a backlash of hostility against the mountain. Many Japanese felt personally betrayed by Fuji: in particular, they resented the fact that its prominent shape had helped to guide allied war planes to their targets in the terrible firebombing of Tokyo.[14]

The people of Edo, modern-day Tokyo, had felt a special fondness for Fuji. They even attempted to bring the mountain to the city. In 1765, in accordance with the final instructions of Jikigyo, one of his disciples initiated the practice of building replicas of Mount Fuji in Tokyo. Devotees of the sacred mountain responded with great enthusiasm: between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, they constructed more than fifty of these models. One of the largest and most impressive is a cone over thirty feet high, constructed on top of an ancient burial mound and capped with volcanic rocks brought back from Fuji itself. Fuji-ko members, especially the old and sick, ritually climb these replicas, imagining themselves climbing the peak itself. In order to provide an authentic experience of the ascent, the models had to evoke the inner feel, rather than the external appearance, of the sacred mountain.

A number of these Fuji replicas still exist in shrines scattered throughout Tokyo, many conveniently located near subway stops. Fuji-ko members perform rituals at the more important ones before going on pilgrimages to the actual peak. I climbed a couple of these models, passing through places replicating the ten stations going up Fuji itself. Near the top of one of the replicas, I came across a small statue of Jikigyo meditating in a miniature cave.[15]

Echoes of this practice spill over into the festival that marks the end of the official climbing season on Mount Fuji. Each year, on August 26, the people of Fuji-Yoshida, a town at the base of the mountain, form a religious procession to carry around two brightly lacquered models of the sacred peak. The larger of the two, borne on wooden beams supported by men with muscular calves, weighs 2475 pounds. Laughing and shouting, enthusiastic schoolboys bear the smaller replica through the crowded streets of the village. Priests in smooth white robes and peaked black caps initiate the ceremonies at the Shinto shrine situated at the foot of Fuji. At night people light a line of straw towers that run up the main street of the town. The resulting bonfires burn like red and orange geysers of molten lava spewing out of the ground. Beneath the mysterious light of the stars, the gods appear to emerge from the mountain to dance in a line of wraith-like flames.

The fire ceremony has its origins in a well-known myth about Konohana Sakuya Hime, the principal goddess of Mount Fuji. According to an account recorded in the eighth century, she married a god who grew suspicious of her when she became pregnant shortly after their wedding. To prove her fidelity to her husband, she entered a burning bower and miraculously gave birth to a son, unscathed by the surrounding flames. The ceremony at Fuji-Yoshida recalls this story as a means of protecting the town from fire and promoting easy childbirth among women.

During the nineteenth century, when the movement reached the height of its popularity, there were said to be 108 Fuji-ko groups – an auspicious number derived from Buddhist sources – each with its own leader and distinctive symbol. Today only ten or eleven remain active. Every summer they make pilgrimages up the mountain. The ritual ascent of the most active group, the Maruto Miyamoto-ko, begins with a ceremony at the leader's home in Tokyo. After making offerings to the deities of Fuji, the members proceed to the mountain, stopping in Fuji-Yoshida at an inn run by an *oshi*, the descendant of a family of religious climbing guides. The current *oshi* of this particular inn, Mr. Tanabe, whom I visited, runs a local museum devoted to preserving the lore of the sacred peak.

The members of Maruto Miyamoto-ko used to start the actual climb from the shrine set in a grove of tall cedars at the base of Mount Fuji, but today they take a bus halfway up the volcano. As they ascend the reddish brown ash slopes above the tree line, moving together in a congenial party of white-clad

pilgrims, they sing a traditional song of purification: "May the six sense organs be pure and may the weather on the honorable mountain be fine." The whole group stops to pray at the cave where Jikigyo Miroku, the saint of Fuji-ko, fasted to death in 1773. Having attained an important objective of their pilgrimage, the more tired members return from this point while the others proceed to the summit, there to worship at the shrine of Konohana Sakuya Hime and ritually circumambulate the crater rim.

When I met Hiyoshige Ida, the leader of the Maruto Miyamoto-ko, he was seventy-one years old and had climbed the mountain 146 times. Ida San, as his followers call him, comes from a long line of Fuji-ko devotees. He made his first ascent of Fuji at the age of seven with his father, the previous leader of the group. A statue of the latter, dressed in pilgrim's garb, stands beside the Shinto shrine that marks the beginning of the traditional climbing route from Fuji-Yoshida. It was built to commemorate his 150th ascent of the mountain. The owner of a small factory in Tokyo, Ida San devoted much of his time and wealth to the Fuji-ko movement, reconstructing a *torii*, or ceremonial gateway, at the Fuji-Yoshida shrine and sponsoring expensive ceremonies. When I asked if his son would succeed him as leader, he smiled and said, "There is a saying that if the leadership of the group stays in a family for three generations, that family will go bankrupt."

A quiet, gentle man, Ida San is deeply devoted to preserving the teachings and memory of Jikigyo Miroku. On the yearly ascent of the volcano, he carries up a ritual mirror inscribed with the word "Sengen," the name of the deity of Mount Fuji, and places it in the cave where the saint martyred himself. He regards this place as the most sacred site on the entire mountain, the principal focal point of the pilgrimage. The teachings that Jikigyo Miroku dictated there as he was fasting to death for the sake of others encourage people to care for each other. As Ida San puts it, "The most important thing in climbing is the inner strength to help each other, so that not just the strongest but all the members of Fuji-ko reach the goal. Mount Fuji, from our religious point of view, is a mountain that accepts all comers."[16]

Like other religious phenomena in Japan, pilgrimage has undergone a process of secularization, taking on the modern forms of mountaineering and tourism. On Fuji hikers and tourists follow routes established long ago by practitioners of Shugendo and devotees of Fuji-ko. In the height of the official climbing season, during the months of July and August, up to 300,000 people swarm up the sides of the volcano to gather like ants on the summit. So many made the ascent in the past, leaving so much refuse and human waste on its sacred slopes, that Fuji at one time had the dubious distinction of possessing the world's first polluted snowfield. Japan was going to nominate the mountain as a UNESCO World Heritage site for its natural values in 1995, but when international experts evaluating proposed sites for UNESCO saw all the litter,

along with a "white river" of toilet paper flowing down from the crater rim, they let it be known that the nomination would be rejected, an enormous embarrassment for the Japanese government and nation. The Fujisan Club, an organization formed to do something about the problem, took the lead in cleaning up the mountain and installing bio-toilets. Others, including the government, joined their efforts, and by 2013 the upper slopes of Fuji were clean enough to be successfully inscribed as a cultural World Heritage site meeting less stringent environmental conditions. However, parts of the volcano, including the forested lower slopes where the *yakuza* or Japanese mafia use logging roads to make a business of illegally dumping refrigerators, cars, and other industrial and medical wastes, had to be left out, as well as a portion of Fuji that forms the upper reaches of a joint Japanese-American military firing range. In 2006, just before climbing Fuji, I went with members of the Fujisan Club into the lower forests to observe their continuing efforts to clean up the sacred mountain that stands as a sublime icon of their nation.

We had come at the beginning of July to witness the opening ceremony of the climbing season at the Murayama Sengen Shrine, the starting point of the oldest route up Mount Fuji, originally established by Buddhist monks and practitioners of Shugendo. School children lining the staircase leading up to the shrine greeted us waving Japanese and British flags. The British Ambassador to Japan was there as a ceremonial participant honoring the memory of Sir Richard Alcock, the first British minister to the country and the first foreigner to climb Fuji, in 1860. Beneath a small waterfall fed by a bamboo tube, men and boys wearing only loincloths entered a pool to stand motionless as water poured over their bodies in a ritual of icy purification. A line of Shugendo practitioners dressed in full attire and blowing conch shells filed up to the start of the climbing route, where their leader lifted a sword over his head and brought it down to cut a rope barring the way, officially opening the climbing season on the south side of Fuji. After going a short way up the path toward the summit, they returned to the shrine to conduct the rest of the ceremony, cleansing the area of evil influences with ritual weapons by shooting an arrow toward the clouds and slicing the air with a sword and axe. The leader then chanted aloud from a sacred text and lit a huge pile of evergreen boughs with a long torch. Flames crackled, sending sparks spinning into the air, and a tower of white smoke twisted up to merge with the overcast sky, marking the end of the ceremony.[17]

Immediately after the opening ceremony, members of the Fujisan Club took me and my companions up the Murayama route from the south. We were the first party of the year up this side of the mountain and had the refuge where we spent the night entirely to ourselves. We rose early and set off in the icy darkness, hoping to see dawn from the summit. But we had started late on account of the cold, and the sun caught us skirting snowfields on the upper

Figure 6 A Shugendo practitioner cuts a rope with his sword to open the climbing season on southern route up Mount Fuji. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

slopes. Although we missed seeing dawn appear from the crater rim, we did see an equally marvelous sight: the triangular shadow of the volcano's perfectly shaped cone extending into the distance on a puffy layer of white clouds far below us, gradually shrinking back into itself with the rising of the sun.

The Murayama route we followed was one of four routes that zigzag up the gritty ash slopes of Fuji, converging on the crater rim from different sides of the volcano. Later in the season with warmer weather, long lines of climbers pass through the upper five of ten stations on each of these routes, each station equipped with huts and amenities such as food, drinks, and bedding. The hut-keepers, descended from religious guides and shrine-attendants of the past, burn Japanese characters into the climbers' staffs, indicating the station they have reached. Most people spend the night sleeping side by side packed tightly

into dormitories in order to rise in the dark and reach the summit well before dawn.

Moving through the eerie silence of the final hours of night, pebbles crunching beneath their feet, the climbers come at last to the crater rim, poised on the edge of darkness. As they wait with arms crossed over their chests to hold in the warmth of their bodies, the sky to the east gradually brightens and the sun emerges from the Pacific Ocean. Beneath their feet, above a darkened world, a reddish gold light ignites the tops of clouds to leap like fire from one to the next, spreading to the limits of the far horizon. Off to the west the dark forms of hills and ridges emerge in graceful curves from a sea of soft blue mist. Immersed in light that flows through the air like water, tourist and pilgrim alike stand in wonder, bathed in the divine splendor of something totally apart from the world of ordinary experience.

MOUNT KOYA

Two hundred miles southwest of Fuji, hidden in the forested depths of the Kii Peninsula, lies another sacred mountain that has played a major role in the religious and cultural history of Japan. Quite different from the lofty volcano, whose isolated cone can be seen from a great distance, Mount Koya rises to a modest altitude of only around 3,000 feet in a tangled range of densely wooded mountains that conceal its secret beauties from the inquisitive eyes of the outside world. A mountain sanctuary like Wutai Shan in China, it consists of an elevated plateau surrounded by eight peaks, whose soft forms enclose the central area in a womb-like space. Only when a visitor reaches this plateau, having ascended by means of a steep cable way, can he or she distinguish Mount Koya from the confusing maze of its surroundings. There, secluded from the bustle of the outside world, appears a gentle valley of giant cedars dotted with the sharp spires and broad pagoda roofs of Buddhist monasteries and temples. Over the occasional honking of automobiles, muted here compared to most other places in Japan, the murmured sound of chanting, punctuated by the occasional ringing of a bell, rises to hover like smoke among the trees. Approaching the sacred area, the visitor feels as though he or she is entering another world, where people live in harmony with the underlying reality of their surroundings.

No mountain in Japan is more intimately involved with the life of one person than is Mount Koya with Kukai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism and one of the most remarkable figures in Japanese history. A brilliant man of many accomplishments, Kobo Daishi – as Kukai is also known – was a gifted philosopher, artist, poet, engineer, and writer, as well as a great religious leader. Born into an aristocratic family in 773 CE, he abandoned a worldly career to become a wandering monk whose life and work profoundly influenced the subsequent course of Japanese civilization. Tradition credits him, among other

things, with devising the phonetic script used in conjunction with Chinese characters to write the Japanese language, and many people today regard him as the father of Japanese culture.[18]

In the course of his early wanderings, Kobo Daishi came across Mount Koya and spent time meditating in its wild but peaceful setting. He regarded mountains as the ideal environment for spiritual practices leading to enlightenment. The natural freedom of stream and forest, far from the irksome constraints of society, especially appealed to him, as his own description of a wandering ascetic similar to himself so clearly attests:

> The blue sky was the ceiling of his hut and the clouds hanging over the mountains were his curtains; he did not need to worry about where he lived or where he slept. In summer he opened his neck band in a relaxed mood and delighted in the gentle breezes as though he were a great king ... Not being obliged to his father or elder brother and having no contact with his relatives, he wandered throughout the country like duckweed floating on water or dry grass blown by the wind.[19]

His words express exactly the kind of sentiments that make mountains attractive to so many people today.

From Mount Koya, Kobo Daishi's wanderings took him eventually to China, where he studied with various Buddhist masters. According to legend, when it came time to return, he went to the shore of the ocean and hurled a three-pronged diamond thunderbolt, the symbol of esoteric Buddhism, toward Japan, praying that it might land at a place suited to become the center of the secret teaching in his native land. The *vajra*, as this thunderbolt is called in the Sanskrit language of India, dwindled into the sky to vanish over the ocean. Years later, when he went to look for it, he met a hunter with two dogs, one black, one white. The man told him that the *vajra* was on the sacred plateau of Mount Koya and offered to lead him there. Then, revealing himself as the god of the hunting field, he mysteriously vanished. Guided by the hunter's dogs, Kobo Daishi climbed Mount Koya and found the *vajra* hanging in an unusual pine tree with clusters of three needles corresponding to the three prongs of the thunderbolt. The goddess of the mountain, Nibutsu Hime, none other than the mother of the hunting god himself, emerged from the forest and gave him permission to construct a monastery. In return he built a shrine in honor of the two deities as guardians of Shingon and its sanctuary on Mount Koya. In this way Kobo Daishi incorporated the older Shinto *kami* or spirit of the sacred mountain into the new Buddhist tradition he had imported from China and India.[20]

At the time Kobo Daishi established his center, Koya was a remote mountain wilderness, frequented only by hunters and hermits. Whether or not he found

the *vajra,* as in the story, in 816 he did write a letter to the emperor of Japan asking for permission to build a monastery on the sacred site:

> According to the meditation sutras, meditation should be practiced preferably on a flat area deep in the mountains. When young, I, Kukai, often walked through mountainous areas and crossed many rivers. There is a quiet, open place called Koya located two days' walk to the west from a point that is one day's walk south from Yoshino . . . High peaks surround Koya in all four directions; no human tracks, still less trails, are to be seen there. I should like to clear the wilderness in order to build a monastery there for the practice of meditation, for the benefit of the nation and of those who desire to discipline themselves.

Kobo Daishi was drawing here on older Shinto beliefs concerning the role of mountain deities in protecting the local community and, by extension, the nation itself. As a further justification, he spoke of the important role of mountains as settings for many of the Buddha's sermons and pointed out that in China "students of meditation fill the five Buddhist temples on Wutai Shan."[21]

The emperor granted him permission to establish a monastic center on Mount Koya, and Kobo Daishi immediately dispatched his disciples to build meditation huts there. Tied up with commitments in the capital city of Kyoto, he himself was only able to come to the sacred mountain two years later, in 818. The following year he performed the rituals of consecration to sanctify the site and clear it of all demonic influences. The actual construction of temples, lecture halls, and other buildings took a long time – too long for Kobo Daishi to see them completed in his lifetime. However, he came as often as he could to meditate in the place where he felt the most at home in the universe. The beautiful poetry he composed there reflects his deep feelings for nature and the joy he experienced in his mountain retreat:

> Spring flowers and autumn chrysanthemums smile upon me,
> The moon at dawn and the breezes at morn cleanse my heart.[22]

At the age of sixty-two, his mind focused in meditation, Kobo Daishi died on his beloved mountain, surrounded by his disciples. At his request, instead of cremating him, they buried his body on the eastern side of Mount Koya, in a beautiful forest of cedars that he loved to frequent. According to traditional accounts, however, he did not die, but instead entered the mountain, where, suspended in a state of meditation, he awaits the coming of the next Buddha, Maitreya. A vast cemetery grew up around this site so that people could have their remains interred in the living presence of Kobo Daishi, whose spirit, they believed, still remained in this world, invisibly working for the liberation of all beings. Over the succeeding centuries monks journeyed forth from Koya to

spread the teachings of Shingon throughout Japan and to bring back to the holy mountain the ashes of all those who saw it as the gateway to paradise and the ultimate goal of enlightenment itself.

Drawn by its growing reputation as a sacred place, pilgrims came to Koya in ever-increasing numbers. Many of them used it as the point of departure for a famous pilgrimage route that Kobo Daishi himself had established around the island of Shikoku. A passage from a novel composed in the thirteenth century expresses the sentiments inspired by the image of Koya in the minds of many Japanese:

> Mount Koya lies at a distance of 200 *ri* from the capital, far from the bustle of the city. The only sound that breaks its stillness is the mountain wind that now and again rustles the branches of the trees. Calm are the trees' shadows thrown by the setting sun. With eight peaks and eight valleys, it is truly a sacred mountain that purifies the hearts of all men. Beneath the misty forests the flowers bloom; among the cloud-capped hills echo the temple bells. On the roof tiles the pine shoots grow; over the clay walls is thick moss. A time-honored place![23]

In keeping with its remote and sequestered setting, Mount Koya is the one of the most important centers of esoteric Buddhism in Japan – the physical and spiritual home of Shingon, the Buddhist school that teaches the secret path leading to the swift attainment of enlightenment in this very life. For more than 1,000 years the priests and holy men of this mountain sanctuary have preserved a rich and complex tradition centered on the visualization and evocation of Dainichi Nyorai, the Buddha of All-Illuminating Wisdom. Like the summit of Fuji, the entire plateau of Mount Koya is regarded as the divine abode of Dainichi, whose name in Japanese means the "Great Sun," referring to the blazing light of enlightenment itself. Over 100 monasteries and temples, some of them wooden pagodas covered with moss, enshrine his gilded image, serenely seated in the midst of peaceful and wrathful deities who symbolize the spiritual forces that must be awakened on the way to realizing the nature of ultimate reality.

Many of these temples also function as inns for the million or so pilgrims and visitors who come each year from all parts of Japan. There, in a setting of beautiful gardens, surrounded by magnificent works of art, they absorb the contemplative atmosphere of the sacred mountain. Some come to study the deepest points of Buddhist doctrine with priests and professors at the Shingon university located in Koya. Others pass their time in a more leisurely way, visiting the numerous shrines and monuments scattered around the plateau. A small town complete with shops and restaurants caters to their material needs so that they may make of their pilgrimage a spiritual holiday. During the summer large groups of school children, each marked with caps of

a distinctive color, tour the sacred sites, sketching the temples and learning about the religious heritage of their country.

Most of the visitors to Mount Koya focus their attention, and devotion, on its cemetery, the largest and most impressive in Japan. Over a mile long, it runs through an ancient grove of gigantic cedars, whose straight trunks stand like columns of silver-grey marble rising into a cloud of foliage. On either side of the main path, rows of Buddha images and stone monuments, some with miniature pagoda roofs, many of them gone green with moss and lichen, vanish into the shadows of the forest. Here and there little doll-like figures dressed in colorful bibs and wool caps, almost primitive in the open simplicity of their expressions, serve to protect children after they have died. Grey wisps of smoke, rising from incense burners, drift up through beams of sunlight, slowly dissipating among the trees. A scent of holiness hangs in the air.

I came to the cemetery about a year after our son Jonathan died in a warehouse fire at a music event in Oakland, California. I asked the monk accompanying the group I was with if he would say a prayer for Jonathan. He took me to a priest who wrote with a brush and black ink our son's name in Japanese characters on a thin strip of wood. Then he had me place the strip in a wooden box filled with other strips of wood at the foot of a bronze image of a Buddha. While the monk recited a mantra in a deep voice, I scooped up water with a ladle and poured it over and over Jonathan's name, its smooth flow slowly cooling and soothing the lingering grief I felt over his fiery death.

When my wife and I had first come to Koya many years earlier, the cemetery with its trees had had a particularly haunting effect. Walking through the cedars, watching pilgrims make offerings to images of silent Buddhas, I had been strongly reminded of hikes we had taken through redwood groves in California, such as the Muir Woods outside San Francisco. Here the trees rose as straight and tall, with the same aura of primeval simplicity, but the additional presence of shrines and incense accentuated the natural sanctity of the forest, producing an overwhelming atmosphere of spiritual devotion in which the living could commune with the dead. A sense of another reality, another world, deeper and more mysterious than the one I knew, hovered on the edge of awareness, palpable and evanescent as the grey mist of incense floating around us, ascending toward the sky.

The sense of the sacred that issues from peaks like Koya and Fuji gradually spread to other parts of Japan. Kobo Daishi spent much of his life going back and forth between mountain and plain, the sacred and the profane. In the pure and peaceful space of Mount Koya, he found the spiritual power and sustenance needed to further his work in the corrupt and congested atmosphere of Kyoto, where he built another center for the propagation of esoteric Buddhism. As a Japanese commentator on his life and works has written, "In time Kukai came to be regarded as a prototype of the holy ascetic of magical power who from

Figure 7 Giant cedars mix with shrines to create an atmosphere of religious devotion in the Okunoin Cemetery on Mount Koya. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

time to time descended from the sacred mountain into the world to help save people." In this way he provided a powerful model for the *yamabushi* practitioners of Shugendo, who incorporated many of the ideas and practices of esoteric Buddhism in their mountain religion.[24]

The *yamabushi* drew, in particular, on a doctrine basic to all of Shingon philosophy – the idea that one can attain enlightenment in this very body and life. Practitioners of esoteric Buddhism put this doctrine into practice through rituals and meditation based on the visualization of two mandalas or sacred circles representing the universe as the realm of Dainichi Nyorai, the Buddha of All-Illuminating Wisdom, who stands at the center of all things. The first, called the womb mandala, embodies the principle of enlightenment inherent in all beings. It has the basic form of an eight-petaled lotus. Impregnated by the compassion of Dainichi, this womb gives birth to the Buddha each person is

destined to become. The second mandala, called the diamond realm, symbolizes the awakened wisdom of enlightenment, no longer latent but fully manifest in the person of Dainichi himself. Through offerings of fire and recitations of mantras, practitioners of Shingon visualize themselves passing through these mandalas to reach the ultimate goal of attaining Buddhahood right here in this world and this life.

Seeking to make such practices as concrete as possible, a matter of experience rather than imagination, Kobo Daishi imposed the womb mandala on Mount Koya itself and viewed the eight peaks of the mountain as the eight petals of the lotus representing the sacred circle. In the plateau at the center of this schematic blossom, he laid out the main temple complex in the form of the diamond mandala, with an image of Dainichi enshrined in the central pagoda. The unity of the two mandalas, one within the other, represented for him the transcendence of all differences, in particular the difference between the beginning and the end of the path to Buddhahood. In this way he sought to transform his disciples' experience of Mount Koya, and the world around it, into that of the divine realm of the Buddha who embodies the ultimate nature of reality. One who could see what was truly there could walk through the two mandalas to the goal of enlightenment, shining through the streams and forest of the mountain itself.[25]

This process of mandalization – as one scholar of Japanese religion, Allan Grapard, has termed the way in which geographical places take on the character of mandalas – spread to other mountains, deepening and enhancing their sacred nature. By the twelfth century, practitioners of Shugendo to the east of Koya had projected the womb and diamond realms of Shingon onto an immense mountainous region stretching from Mount Yoshino in the north of the Kii Peninsula to Kumano in the south. The two mandalas overlapped in the middle, at Mount Omine:

> This peak is the pure temple of the two realms: it is the original, non-created mandala; the summits covered with trees are the perfect altars of the nine parts of the diamond mandala, and the caverns filled with fragrant herbs are the eight petals of the lotus in the womb mandala. Mountains and rivers, trees and plants are the true body of the Buddha Dainichi.[26]

Yamabushi adopted the practice of going from mountain to mountain, following pilgrimage routes laid out on the pattern of painted mandalas found hanging on temple walls. At each place where a deity would be invoked in a particular mandala, they would perform the corresponding ritual on an actual peak. By entering the mountains in this way, they would plunge into the divine realm of the Buddha, seen as this very world.

Unfolding from the summits of sacred peaks, mandalas blossomed like giant flowers, spreading over the landscape of Japan. Overlapping with each other,

they eventually covered the entire country, filling the atmosphere with the fragrance of their sanctity. The mandalas that emerged from mountains as the original seed beds of sacred power and space, embodied from ancient times in the *kami* deities of the Shinto tradition, transformed Japan itself into a divine nation in the eyes of its people, a land protected and blessed by the gods. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that by the beginning of the modern period, following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, one of the most important symbols of the country had become Mount Fuji, the highest and most beautiful mountain in Japan. In its inspiring form the Japanese saw a divine crystallization of all that they revered in their land and their society.

The divinization of the country came to an end when the disastrous defeat of World War II provoked a profound disillusionment with everything that had contributed to the growth of Japanese imperialism. An infatuation with technology and economic development has contributed to the process of disenchantment by shifting attention away from the realm of the sacred. However, at a deeper level, reflected in the maintenance of traditional beliefs and customs, old attitudes toward the *kami* and the places they inhabit still influence Japanese views of the world around them. Released from bondage to imperialistic ends, mountains, the most impressive abode of the *kami*, have reverted to their natural role as symbols of spiritual power and freedom. Although modernization has masked their influence, hiding it in the guise of pursuits such as mountaineering and tourism, they continue to inspire a sense of the sacred that unites the Japanese people in a love for the land on which they live and for everything connected with it – from the unearthly heights of heavenly peaks down to the mundane realities of everyday life.

FIVE

SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Cosmic Centers

Dry hills of ancient rock, green ranges of jungle peaks, slick summits of wet granite, fiery volcanoes of fresh ash – a great diversity characterizes the mountains of South and Southeast Asia, reflecting the variety of cultures that fill the region. Aside from the Himalayas, which we have covered in a separate chapter, South Asia comprises the Indian subcontinent and the island of Sri Lanka. It includes crystalline mountains formed of some of the oldest bedrock in the world, remnants of an ancient continent called Gondwanaland. Southeast Asia covers the Asian peninsula east of India and south of China, along with its continuation in a line of Pacific islands that curves eastward toward Australia and New Guinea. Its mountains range from the Himalayan outliers of northern Burma through the hills of Thailand and Cambodia to the volcanoes of Indonesia. The region also includes the mountainous islands of Borneo and the Philippines.

For many cultures of South and Southeast Asia, a single idea of great power brings together these diverse and far-flung peaks – the concept of a cosmic center that gives order and stability to the universe around it. This idea finds its principal expression in two major images of sacred mountains: the view of Mount Kailas as the abode of Shiva and the vision of Mount Meru as the axis of the cosmos. Throughout South Asia numerous hills and temples dedicated to Shiva as Lord of the Universe are regarded as replicas of his Himalayan peak; they serve as centers of sacred power, drawing pilgrims from all directions. South Asians also revere a number of peaks as fragments of Mount Meru, given

to them by the gods to bring them closer to the center of the cosmos and the source of blessings and stability it embodies. With the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism from India through Southeast Asia, images of Kailas and Meru have adapted to local beliefs and passed from peak to peak, travelling as far as the distant islands of Indonesia. Along the way the idea of a cosmic center enshrined in these mountains has attached itself to kings and religious leaders, giving them the stature and power of gods.

SOUTH ASIA

South of the Himalayas and the Gangetic Plain, low mountain ranges border the Deccan Plateau that makes up the well-worn heart of the Indian subcontinent. The Vindhya Range forms the northern rim of this ancient plateau while the Eastern and Western Ghats slant down its sides to converge in the Nilgiri Hills in the south. Aside from these ranges, smaller hills and ridges ripple across the Indian landscape, shimmering green and brown beneath the tropical sun. Across from the southern tip of India, a fragment of the prehistoric continent of Gondwanaland – the ancestor of the present-day Indian subcontinent – rises out of the Indian Ocean to form the mountainous island of Sri Lanka, with its steep escarpments and jungle-covered peaks of gneiss and schist.

Since at least 1000 BCE, hills and mountains throughout South Asia have attracted attention as objects of religious veneration. After the Buddha attained enlightenment in the sixth century BCE, he delivered many of his most important sermons on Vulture Peak, a rocky hill outside the north Indian village of Rajgir, not far from the holy city of Varanasi. Imitating the model of Vulture Peak, Buddhist communities elsewhere in India and Sri Lanka claimed local hills and mountains as sacred places blessed by their founder's teaching activities. The Jains, followers of a nonviolent religion that arose during the same period, also revered mountain peaks as sites of important acts performed by their various Tirthankaras or savior teachers, including Mahavira, a near contemporary of the Buddha. Two of their principal places of pilgrimage today are sacred mountains: Mount Abu in the north, noted for the intricate delicacy of its temple sculpture, and Shravana Belagola in south India with its enormous statue of Bahubali, son of the first Tirthankara.[1]

Following the rise of Hindu devotional sects around the third century BCE, numerous mountains became identified with the abode of Shiva. One of the most important today is the sacred hill of Arunachala in south India. Revealing its role as a cosmic center, the *Skanda Purana* says of it:

> That is the holy place! Of all Arunachala is the most sacred. It is the heart of the world. Know it to be the secret and sacred heart-center of Shiva. In that place He always abides as the glorious Arunachala.[2]

Each year in November thousands of pilgrims come to Arunachala, the "Mountain of Light," to worship Shiva as a phallus of fire – a cosmic pillar of creative power. Drawn by the spiritual magnetism of the sacred hill, which he viewed as a manifestation of the god himself, Ramana Maharshi, one of the greatest Indian sages of the twentieth century, spent his life meditating and teaching at its foot.

Followers of Shiva also constructed many of their temples as human-made replicas of his Himalayan abode. East of Mumbai a famous rock-hewn shrine carved out of the cliffs of Ellora in the eighth century CE is dedicated to Shiva as Kailasanatha, "Lord of Mount Kailas." In south India, near Chennai, another well-known temple of the period, built at Kanchipuram, bears the same name. Like its counterpart at Ellora, it has the general form of a mountain covered with deities, portrayed in beautifully sculpted images, but there is little evidence that it was modeled on the particular shape of Mount Kailas. Hindus of the period knew Kailas from idealized descriptions in religious texts, not from direct observation. Like the Himalayan peak it vaguely resembles, the temple serves as an abode of Shiva, evoking his presence in the hearts of those who came to worship him.

The symbolism of Mount Meru as the axis of the universe and dwelling place of the gods lies imbedded in the architecture of many Hindu temples. The pointed superstructure that rises directly over the sanctuary holding the main deity is called a *shikhara*, the Sanskrit word for a mountain peak. Like a *mandala* with Meru at the center, the temple renews the profane world of ordinary experience, transforming it into the sacred realm of a god. A number of well-known Hindu shrines in south India, such as Tirupatti near Madras, actually rest on hills regarded as pieces of Meru, reinforcing their association with the cosmic axis symbolized in the mountain. In so doing they express a concern for order and unity fundamental to Indian thought. Through the experience of the cosmic center embodied in the temple as a sacred peak, what seems haphazard and chaotic becomes ordered and meaningful. Organized around the image of Mount Meru, the world makes sense. Through the symbolism of the cosmic mountain linking earth to heaven, a vision opens of the ultimate path leading to release from the suffering of death and rebirth.[3]

At an early period, Buddhist and Hindu ideas concerning sacred mountains spread to Sri Lanka. In the fifth century BCE Indo-Europeans from north India sailed south to colonize the island. Their descendants became the Sinhalese, the people who dominate Sri Lanka today. Between the third and second centuries BCE, Buddhist missionaries from India converted the island to the Buddha's teaching. After Muslim invasions forced Indians to abandon Buddhism in the thirteenth century, the Sinhalese maintained the religion in Sri Lanka, making it a stronghold of Theravada, or Southern, Buddhism. During the preceding millennium, Tamils from south India had migrated to the island; more came in

the nineteenth century to work as laborers in the British Empire. A Dravidian people who preserved a mixture of Aryan and pre-Aryan traditions, they brought with them the sect of devotional Hinduism focused on the worship of Shiva and his son Karttikeya. Bloody clashes between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese have created the political turmoil that agitates Sri Lanka today. Despite their differences both groups revere a mountain that brings together ideas associated with hills and peaks throughout South Asia. Because of its ecumenical nature, having attracted the attention of Christians and Muslims as well as Hindus and Buddhists, this mountain, Adam's Peak, has become one of the most famous sacred mountains in the world.

Adam's Peak (Sri Pada)

Among the peaks set like precious stones upon the heights of Sri Lanka, known to the ancients as the "Isle of Jewels," one has the unique distinction of being regarded as sacred by the adherents of more major world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity – than any other mountain on earth: Adam's Peak or Sri Pada. A marvelous cone of polished gneiss, its beautifully sculpted summit rises cleanly out of the green waves of jungle that swirl about its flanks. From the heights of its summit on the southwestern part of the island, long ridges of undulating hills ripple away to the gleaming edge of the Indian Ocean, a blue band on the horizon. Viewed from a ship at sea, the solitary situation of the mountain presents such a striking appearance that early Western travelers greatly overestimated its altitude. One of the first Europeans to see Adam's Peak was so impressed that he wrote:

> It hath a pinnacle of surpassing height, which on account of clouds can rarely be seen; but it lighted up one morning just before the sun rose, so that [we] beheld it glowing like the brightest flame. It is the highest mountain on the face of the earth.[4]

The mountain is, in fact, only 7,359 feet high, less than half the height of the Matterhorn, the archetypal Alpine peak to which other European travelers have tended to compare it.

On the very summit, high above the surrounding jungle, is a strange depression carved out of the rock in the rough shape of an enormous foot. This footprint makes the mountain sacred in the eyes of millions of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, who come on pilgrimage each year by the tens of thousands to venerate it as a holy relic. According to the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka, the Buddha, who lived in India during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, visited the island three times to rid the country of demons and preach sermons to various divine beings. On his third visit he "left the trace of his footsteps on Sumanakuta" – an early Buddhist name for Adam's Peak.

According to a later account recorded by Faxian, a famous Chinese pilgrim who came to India to obtain Buddhist teachings around 400 CE, the Buddha used his magic powers to plant one foot near the capital of Sri Lanka and the other on top of the mountain. Local tradition maintains that his actual footprint lies engraved on a huge sapphire imbedded in the rock beneath the depression visible on the surface today.[5]

The followers of Islam regard the hollow as the footprint of Adam, whom they revere as the first prophet and patriarch of the human race. The high esteem in which they hold this Biblical figure derives, in part, from earlier beliefs of Christian Gnostics, who venerated him as the primordial man, created from the breath of God. A fourth-century Coptic manuscript from the Middle East contains a cryptic reference to a footprint left by Adam but fails to mention where the sacred relic might be. After the founding of Islam in the seventh century, a belief arose among Muslims that after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, he spent a number of years doing penance on a mountain in India before being reunited with Eve on Mount Arafat near the holy city of Mecca. When Arab seafarers in the ninth century brought back reports of the Buddhist relic on the summit of Adam's Peak, their countrymen concluded that it must be the footprint left by Adam in the course of expiating his sins.[6]

The adherents of two other major religions also revere the depression in the rock as a holy relic. Hindus worship it as the footstep of the great God Shiva, whose abode lies far to the north on the summit of Mount Kailas. Shiva seems to have come here to establish himself as an object of devotion at a fairly late date. The first evidence we have for a cult of his footprint on the summit of Adam's Peak occurs in the sixteenth century, when the chronicles record that a king of Sri Lanka repudiated the dominant religion of Buddhism and put control of the shrine in the hands of Shaivite priests devoted to the worship of the Hindu god. Before that time Hindus probably venerated the peak as the abode of Agastya, a noted sage of Hindu mythology, and Dharma, the divine embodiment of righteousness. Finally, not to be outdone by other traditions, the Christians of India and Sri Lanka have long claimed the relic as the footprint of Saint Thomas, the apostle who is said to have come to India to preach the Gospels after the death of Jesus. The Portuguese, who controlled parts of Sri Lanka for a number of years, encouraged this belief, although they were the ones who gave the mountain the name by which it is most widely known – Pico de Adam, or Adam's Peak.[7]

The name Adam's Peak comes from Muslim beliefs concerning the legend of Adam. The people of Sri Lanka, who are mostly Buddhist and Hindu, have other names for the mountain. In memory of the Buddha's visit to the peak, they call it Siripada, the "Glorious Footprint." Another name refers to the ancient Buddhist deity of the mountain itself. According to the early chronicles of Sri Lanka, written in Pali, when the Buddha came to the island, one of the

deities who heard his sermons and made great progress on the path to enlightenment was Sumana, the god of Sumanakuta, or "Sumana's Peak." In the modern language of Sinhalese, Sumana has become Saman and the name of the mountain Samanala Kanda, the "Peak of Saman." Saman plays an important role in the Buddhist religion of Sri Lanka as one of the four deities charged with protecting the island from evil. He has given his name to the Samanalaya butterflies that come each spring to swarm like yellow clouds about the cliffs of the sacred peak. The Hindus of Sri Lanka call the mountain Shivan Adipadam, the "Primordial Footstep of Shiva." This name evokes images of the cosmic dance of Shiva in which, as supreme deity, he creates, preserves, and destroys the entire universe, all at the same time.[8]

For more than 1,000 years, Adam's Peak has fascinated countless pilgrims, drawing them to its summit regardless of their different traditions and beliefs. The first recorded historical ascent of the mountain – undertaken for religious reasons – took place in the last decade of the seventh century. A Chinese biography of Vajrabodhi, an Indian master of esoteric Buddhist teachings, describes his climb of Adam's Peak in a matter of fact, almost contemporary, fashion:

> When at last, he reached the foot of the mountain, he found the country wild, inhabited by wild beasts and extraordinarily rich in precious stones. After long waiting, he was able to climb to the summit and contemplate the impression of Buddha's foot. From the summit, he saw on the northwest the kingdom of Ceylon, and on all other sides the ocean.[9]

The Chinese account does not make clear whether Vajrabodhi was following an established route of pilgrimage or just exploring the area on his own. The earliest historical evidence for an actual Buddhist practice of ritually climbing the mountain to venerate the footprint on the summit occurs in rock-cut inscriptions dating from the eleventh century. They indicate that a king named Vijayabahu (1055–1110) ascended Adam's Peak and made arrangements for villages along the way to help other pilgrims in their attempts to reach the top. Ibn Batuta, an Arab traveler who visited Sri Lanka in 1340, wrote that an Islamic sage by the name of Imam Abu-Abd-Allah had already initiated a Muslim pilgrimage to the mountain in the tenth century. Arabic inscriptions carved on the wall of a cave near Adam's Peak indicate that such pilgrimages had become established practice by the thirteenth century: one reads, "Muhammad, may god bless him [the father of Man]."[10]

The classic pilgrimage route begins in Ratnapura, the "City of Jewels," near a beautiful temple dedicated to Saman, the Buddhist god of Adam's Peak. Pilgrims who take the difficult route of ancient times and travel by foot leave behind the reassuring world of civilization to plunge into the wilderness of the peak – a maze of jungle-covered hills and ravines arranged like a series of

ramparts and moats guarding the approaches to the sacred mountain. The hot sun of the open sky vanishes behind a dense canopy of overarching foliage, replaced by a cooler world of hanging vines, gently twisting in a greenish light that floats like mist between the trees. Watered by streams trickling through the lush undergrowth, flowers of various shapes and sizes appear here and there in stands of bamboo lining the trail, their bright colors muted in the soft shadows of the forest. The occasional cry of a wild creature or the musical call of a bird brings to sharp attention a sudden awareness of the invisible life concealed in the dark recesses of the surrounding jungle. As the path gains height and climbs toward the peak hidden in the sky above the trees, it winds through an obstacle course of enormous boulders draped with moss and hanging ferns.

As they move through this eerie world of mysterious beauty, the pilgrims chant from the religious texts they carry in their hands and perform the rituals that give their journey the added dimension of a spiritual quest. They stop at a river to bathe in its smoothly flowing waters and put on a clean set of clothes, purifying themselves for entry into the sacred presence of the holy relic above. Where the peak first comes into view, they pause to add a pebble to a cairn of stones. At another spot Buddhist pilgrims hurl a needle with a piece of thread into a bush to commemorate the place where legend says that helpful spirits mended a tear in the Buddha's robe. Tradition also dictates that those who are climbing the peak for the first time must wind a turban of white cloth about their heads.

In the old days pilgrims would emerge from the jungle to confront the final, terrifying obstacle of the journey: a smooth cliff of bulging precipices that they would have to surmount by means of ancient chains fastened to the polished rock, some say, by Alexander the Great when he came to India in the fourth century BCE. The more sober historical chronicles of Sri Lanka, however, state that these chains were installed by the minister of a local king at a much later date, in the thirteenth century CE. Since they hung free with only their upper ends attached to the cliff, they would sway over the void as one lurched from rung to rung, anxiously seeking a firmer purchase on top. There are stories told of people watching in horror as an entire family, caught on the chains in a sudden windstorm, would be whipped about and flung, one by one, to their deaths on the jungle-covered rocks below.

Today most pilgrims ascend the final cliffs by means of a staircase constructed on the other, easier side of the mountain. In 1947 the minister of transport made a vow to Saman, the Buddhist God of Adam's Peak, that in exchange for the deity's help in completing a hydroelectric project to provide power for the city of Colombo, the government would illuminate the pilgrimage route to the summit. In 1950, after the project had been completed, apparently with divine assistance, he fulfilled his side of the bargain by having electric lights installed along the staircase leading up the final peak. Seen from the distance at twilight,

they appear as a string of bright pearls draped in a graceful curve across the mountain, a dark silhouette against a dark blue sky.[11]

Most pilgrims make use of these lights to climb the peak at night in order to reach the summit before dawn. As they huddle about fires, reciting prayers and warming themselves in the sharp chill of the early hour, a marvelous spectacle unfolds to the west. The long tapering shadow of Adam's Peak materializes on a layer of clouds and ridges, looking like an elongated finger pointing toward some ultimate mystery concealed behind a blue-grey mist on the edge of the world. As the light brightens, the delicate tip of this ethereal pyramid glides swiftly back from the horizon, contracting into the mountain from which it came, bringing with it a touch of the infinite that leaves the entranced pilgrims with the overwhelming sense of standing poised for one brief moment at the unimaginable center of the universe. Then, with the rising of the sun, they turn to pay homage to the sacred footprint beside them.

Whether Buddhist or Hindu, Muslim or Christian, the pilgrims join in a spirit of harmonious devotion, each worshipping the appropriate deity in his or her own traditional way. Some recite prayers and make offerings; others sit in quiet meditation. Those who have already made the pilgrimage ring a bell, once for each previous ascent. Many collect the rainwater that has accumulated in the depression of the holy relic or in a nearby well: they will take it back for its healing powers. Some offer a coil of silver wire as long as their bodies in a ritual meant to help them recover from illness. Whatever form their devotion takes, the pilgrims all seek the spiritual blessing or power left by the holy person or deity who, they believe, made the sacred footprint on the summit of Adam's Peak.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Separated by the valleys of rivers such as the Irrawaddy, the Salween, and the Mekong, mountain ranges curve off the eastern end of the Tibetan Plateau to meander down the peninsula of Southeast Asia and peter out among jungles and plains along the coast. Beyond the southern tip of the mainland in Malaysia, mountains surge back up in a line of island peaks created by some of the most intense volcanic activity on earth – an activity made dramatically manifest in the great explosion of Krakatoa, which in 1883 darkened skies around the world with clouds of dust and ash. North of this line of fire, traced by Indonesian islands such as Java and Bali, rises the highest mountain in this region outside of Burma – the jungle peak of Kinabalu, 13,435 feet high, in northern Borneo. For the Dusun people who live near it, the granite slabs that cap its summit are the haunted abode of ancestral spirits.

Before traders introduced Indian culture in the beginning of the first millennium CE, the peoples of Southeast Asia, whose ancestors had come mostly from

southeastern Tibet and southern China, revered mountains as abodes of the dead and sources of water and fertility. Devoted to the worship of sacred hills as ancestral shrines of important chieftains, they responded with enthusiasm to Buddhist and Hindu ideas of Meru and Kailas as centers of cosmic power. Beginning with the ancient Cambodian kingdom of Funan in the second century CE, they made these conceptions the basis for systems of divine kingship in which they treated their kings and emperors as deities enthroned on the summit of one or the other of the two mountains of Indian mythology. The name *Funan* comes from an expression meaning either "Sacred Mountain" or "King of the Mountain," the title for the ruler of the country in his role as an incarnation of Shiva. The Khmer, who took over Cambodia in the ninth century and dominated much of Southeast Asia until the fifteenth century, built their capital cities and temples as models of the universe centered around architectural representations of Mount Meru in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. The central tower and surrounding four towers of the famous temple complex at Angkor Wat, for example, represent the five peaks of the cosmic axis while the walls and moats around them symbolize ranges and oceans encircling the sacred mountain.

Beginning with the kingdom of Pyu in the seventh century CE, Buddhist rulers of Burma constructed their palaces as replicas of the residence of Indra on the summit of Meru. Whoever occupied the palace did so as the representative of the king of the gods, from whom he derived his authority to rule. According to this model of government, the wives and ministers of the ruler had to correspond in number and rank to those surrounding Indra on top of his mountain. Burma itself was a microcosm of the universe governed by the god of the sacred peak. The symbolism of Mount Meru as the center of cosmic power made it relatively easy to usurp the throne: all one had to do was to take the palace, and the fact of having succeeded would constitute proof to the people that one had received the authority needed to rule the entire country in the name of Indra. The last king of Burma, who reigned in the nineteenth century, refrained from venturing out of his capital for fear that one of his relatives might overthrow him by moving into his residence as an uninvited guest. A few years later, after the British took over, a group of rebels armed only with swords tried to take back the kingdom by storming the palace, which the English had converted into a social club. Some officers who were there for drinks stopped them with hunting rifles.[12]

Sometime before the fifth century CE, the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism spread from the mainland of Southeast Asia to the islands of Indonesia. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Shailendra Dynasty of central Java constructed the magnificent monument of Borobudur, the largest Buddhist structure in the world – and one of the most enigmatic. Hidden beneath the ashes of a volcanic eruption and the subsequent growth of jungle, it

was only discovered by Europeans in the nineteenth century. Much of its symbolism remains unknown. Laid out in the form of *mandala* covered with statues and smaller monuments, called *stupas*, Borobudur appears to represent a model of the spiritual universe organized around the axis of Mount Meru. In climbing a series of galleries and terraces that rise toward its central spire, one follows a symbolic path leading up to the ultimate peak of perfect enlightenment. Significantly, *Shailendra*, the name of the dynasty that built the mountain-shaped monument, means "Lord of the Mountains" – a reference to Meru itself.[13]

As Buddhist and Hindu dynasties vied for control of Indonesia, the merging of different traditions that held mountains in the highest regard transformed volcanoes of distinctive size and shape into sacred centers of great power and significance. Peaks that originally had only local importance as abodes of ancestral spirits became awesome replicas of Mount Meru, the axis of the universe. The highest peak in Java, Mount Semeru, 12,060 feet high, was named after Sumeru, the Buddhist name for the cosmic mountain of Indian mythology. According to myths that developed during this period, Java and Bali were originally unstable, bobbing like boats on the surface of the ocean. In order to stop them from wobbling, the gods reached far to the north of India and brought Meru down to fix the islands to the earth. The body of the mythical mountain they drove into the interior of eastern Java like a nail to create the magnificent volcano of Semeru. The summit they set down not far from there, to become Mount Penanggungan, a perfectly shaped cone surrounded, like Meru, by four subsidiary peaks. Penanggungan played an important role in the ceremonial life of Java's most glorious empire, ruled by the Majapahit Dynasty that unified most of Indonesia in the fourteenth century CE. Between 1935 and 1940 the ruins of more than eighty temples and shrines were discovered on the slopes of the sacred mountain. Carvings at one of these sanctuaries show that its builders regarded the spring feeding its bathing pool as the source of the elixir of immortality created when the gods used Meru for a stick to churn the ocean just as they used the mythical mountain of Mandara to do the same in the Indian myth evoked by the Nepali name of Mount Everest.[14]

When Islam took over Java in the sixteenth century, the mountains of that island lost much of their sanctity, rejected as sites of pagan worship. Bali, however, remained Hindu, ruled by refugees from the Majapahit Dynasty. According to Balinese myth, after Java fell to Islam, the Hindu gods moved to Bali, where they created peaks at the four points of the compass in order to have dwelling places of suitable height and grandeur. The highest mountain, Gunung Agung, they set at the eastern position, the place of honor that receives the first light of the rising sun. In another version of the legend, they placed it at the very center, again indicating its status as the most important peak in Bali. Today the Balinese volcano reigns supreme as the

most actively worshipped mountain in all the islands of Indonesia – and most of Southeast Asia.[15]

Gunung Agung

Nearly 3,000 miles east of Sri Lanka, across the Indian Ocean in the distant archipelago of Indonesia, lies Bali, an island noted for the beauty and prominence of its sacred mountains. Many of the peaks that form the dramatic highlands of this lush and verdant island are active volcanoes that run from east to west like a line of watchtowers set high above the deep blue sea. The ominous plumes of white smoke and steam that rise from their craters to twist and billow in the wind lend a visible dimension of physical power to the aura of sanctity that hangs, and sometimes rumbles, about their lofty summits. When they erupt, as they often do in terrifying signs of divine displeasure, they bring destruction and death to the tranquil villages that cluster about their feet. Yet the very ash that sears the flesh and burns the fields produces in time the fertile soil that has made the islands a green paradise of plentiful food and pleasant life.

The people of Bali have a special reverence for the sacred mountains that loom so visibly over their land and lives. There, on blue summits above the clouds, dwell the high gods and ancestral spirits who have the power to reward them for their virtue and punish them for their sins. As the divine link between heaven and earth, the mountains embody all that is holy and good, the source of innumerable blessings made manifest in the waters of life that flow down from their heights. Every hill or peak in Bali has a shrine; the higher the hill or peak, the more sacred the shrine. The sea, on the other hand, is associated with the underworld and all that is demonic and evil. The people of Bali regard the ocean with its turbulent waves and treacherous currents as the dangerous realm of terrifying monsters and malevolent spirits who threaten to disrupt the divine order of existence. Living in the intermediate zone between the mountains and sea, they seek to balance within themselves the system of opposites that pervades their view of the world: high and low, gods and demons, good and evil, life and death.

According to Balinese tradition, after the gods had stabilized Java, they took a piece of the original Meru from Mount Semeru and used it to pin down the island of Bali. This piece, which the Balinese regard as a form of Meru itself, became the highest and most sacred mountain in Bali – a magnificent volcano called Gunung Agung. Situated in the northeast corner of the island, the peak rises in unrivaled majesty to an altitude of 9,944 feet. Its summit, visible from most parts of Bali, often floats above a layer of white clouds, appearing to belong to another, higher world beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. As one gazes up toward it, looking into the light of the morning sun, the patterns that may appear in the sky can easily take the form of bright gods hovering about the

highest peak. Steep slopes of grey ash laid down by recent eruptions make the ascent to the crater a difficult task, especially for those laden with food and other offerings to give to Mahadewa, the Great God of Gunung Agung. Beneath the forbidding reaches of the upper cone, the base of the volcano fans out to form a warm and inviting region of green terraces glowing with rice and tranquil villages shaded by tropical trees.

The people of Bali, in fact, speak of Gunung Agung as "the Navel of the World." This term comes from its association with Meru, the mythical mountain at the center of the Hindu universe. The name Gunung Agung means in the Balinese language "the Great Mountain," a direct reference to the peak as Mahameru or Great Meru, the title by which the cosmic axis of Indian mythology is known in Bali. The conception of Gunung Agung as the Navel of the World is no mere abstraction created to delight the mind of a scholar. The mountain functions for the Balinese in a very real and tangible way as the principal center toward which they orient themselves in the course of their daily lives. Each night when they lie down to sleep, they must point their heads toward Gunung Agung: to align themselves the other way, pointed toward the sea, would be equivalent to dying and assuming the position of a corpse. Without a sense of their relationship to the mountain, they become ill with feelings of dizziness and nausea. Since most Balinese live south of Gunung Agung, the peak defines for them *kaja*, the sacred direction of the north, in opposition to *kelod*, the southern direction of death, represented by the sea.[16]

Every temple on the island of Bali, no matter how small, contains a shrine dedicated to the deity of Gunung Agung. They resemble little pagodas in the shape of miniature peaks with a single roof made of sugar palm fiber. Known as *merus*, these pagodas – and their full-size counterparts with multiple roofs at major temples, also termed *merus* – call to mind Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain embodied in Gunung Agung. The shrines link the island's many temples to the largest and holiest of all – Pura Besakih, the mother temple of Bali, perched high on the southwest slope of the sacred peak itself. There, beneath an impressive view of the massive cone wreathed in streaming clouds that suggest the latent power brooding in its crater, a great complex of nearly 200 pagodas, shrines, and courtyards cascades in graceful steps down a series of terraces cut into the side of the mountain. A ceremonial gate shaped like a temple spire split vertically down the middle guides the eye up to the sacred summit of Gunung Agung as it leads the body into the spiritual heart of Besakih, an elaborate shrine of three altars dedicated to Sanghyang Widhi Wasa, the supreme deity in his manifestation as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the Hindu gods responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe.

Besakih, with its awesome backdrop of Gunung Agung, is the site of one of the largest and most impressive ceremonies in the world – the great Eka Dasa

Rudra festival, so magnificent and powerful that tradition dictates that it be performed only once a century. Over the course of several months, in which everyone on the island visits the temple, the high priests of Bali summon all the deities of the Hindu pantheon in a series of elaborate rituals intended to dispel the forces of evil and destruction that threaten the order of existence. In a great ceremony of exorcism and purification, they seek to restore harmony and balance to the entire universe, from the lowest depths of hell to the highest reaches of heaven. Eka Dasa Rudra means literally "The Eleven of Rudra," indicating the all-encompassing nature of the ritual. "Eleven" stands for the eleven directions that account for the totality of space: east, south, west, north, southeast, southwest, northwest, northeast, the nadir, the zenith, and the center. "Rudra" refers to the one god Sanghyang Widhi Wasa in his wrathful manifestation as Siwa or Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction invoked to pacify or destroy the forces of evil.[17]

Tradition allows one exception to the rule that Eka Dasa Rudra take place only once a century: in times of exceptional trouble, it can be performed to purify the world of malevolent influences. In 1963 Indonesia was experiencing famine and political turmoil that eventually led in 1965 to the overthrow of President Sukarno and a bloodbath against communists in which 300,000 people lost their lives. The priests made a controversial decision to conduct the ceremony at that time to restore harmony to the nation. As they began preparations in February of 1963, Gunung Agung, which had remained dormant for 136 years, stirred with ominous rumblings and began to give off erratic puffs of turgid smoke and noxious fumes. On March 17, just nine days after a major sacrifice to the god of the mountain, the volcano erupted with a tremendous roar, spewing a black cloud thousands of feet into the sky. Waves of superheated water mixed with searing ash and poisonous gases swept down the slopes of the peak, wiping out villages and killing over 1,000 people. A strange dry rain of smoking pebbles fell from the sky, clattering on the ground and turning the bright green terraces into a grey wasteland of ruined fields and crops. A villager who just managed to escape from his village temple before it burned described his terrifying experience:

> Suddenly it was dark again. I ran out of the temple, but a cloud that was very hot came toward us, and I went back and prayed with the others. There was no noise at first, but then the *duk-duk-duk-duk-duk* of falling stones. Some people in the temple seemed to be sleeping. I tried to wake them, but they would not answer – they were dead. There were children, too, but they could not cry. They made strange wailing noises, because they had ashes in their mouths.[18]

In May the volcano erupted again, killing 100 more people in villages along its northern slopes. Most of these and the earlier victims died in avalanches of

hot mud and lava accompanied by searing gases. In all, more than 1,500 people perished. Some 85,000 had to flee their homes, half of them never to return. The bitter ash that fell miles from the volcano rendered large areas of Bali uninhabitable for a generation, forcing 40,000 refugees to be resettled on other islands in Indonesia. The Balinese interpreted the disaster as the deities' chastisement for sins they had committed. Imade Budi, a well-known Balinese artist, told me that many of the people blamed it on the government for having skimped on ritual offerings to the gods: he pointed out that the governor of Bali – a communist who had little interest in the ceremony – made the people cut up each coconut, which should have been a single offering, into 100 smaller offerings.

Throughout this period, even during the eruptions themselves, the ceremonies of Eka Dasa Rudra continued on the slopes of the volcano itself. Although ash fell on Besakih, covering it in a layer six inches deep and flattening weaker structures made of thatch, most of the temple survived intact, its pagodas and shrines left standing like black tombstones in a grey cemetery. The people of Bali took this as a sign of the great sanctity of their holiest shrine, which the volcano had chosen to spare. After the first eruption, the government tried to keep worshippers away from the temple, but their faith in the inherent goodness of their sacred mountain was so strong that they continued to come in great numbers, forcing the authorities to give up their attempt to protect the populace from the wrath of the gods. The ceremony itself, however, was cut short.

Sixteen years later, in 1979, when the time was judged right, the Eka Dasa Rudra was performed without incident. This time the festival took place in an atmosphere of peace and rejoicing, accompanied by great pageantry. Each day, beginning at the end of February, thousands of Balinese came to Besakih in long processions bearing gifts for the gods – flowers, fruit, animals, and grains. Using all the artistic skills for which the people of Bali are famous, hundreds of them spent countless hours sculpting rice flour on structures of woven palm leaves to create the ornate and colorful *sarad* offerings depicting the highest deities in the midst of the crowded realms of existence over which they rule. Like the fruits of the earth from which they sprang, these magnificent works of art flowered for a brief moment before being consumed in ceremonies symbolizing the great sacrifice that constitutes the eternal round of life and death. In honor of the deities being invoked in these rituals, troops of men and women wearing graceful costumes with fanlike headdresses came to make their offerings with the sacred steps and gestures of traditional Balinese dances. By the time the multiple ceremonies of the festival drew to an end in early May, more than a million people had come to worship the highest gods on the slopes of the holy mountain of Gunung Agung.

At an important juncture several weeks after the opening rituals, the high priests invited the deities of other sacred mountains to come to Besakih and honor the festival with their exalted presence. Emissaries were dispatched to Mount Semeru in Java and Mount Rinjani on the neighboring island of Lombok. They returned with bamboo tubes filled with water ritually drawn from springs high on the slopes of the sacred peaks. These tubes, along with others gathered from holy places in Bali, most notably the volcanic lake of nearby Mount Batur, embodied the essence of the deities themselves. The waters of Semeru had a particular importance for the Balinese, who regard the deity of that mountain as the father of the gods of Gunung Agung, their most sacred peak, and Mount Rinjani, the volcano whose silhouette looms across the straits in Lombok. In an elaborate ceremony the deities of Besakih were ritually installed in images and ceremonially carried to the entrance of the temple to welcome their distinguished guests.

On March 25, as the festival approached the main sacrifice of Eka Dasa Rudra, a procession set out from a village east of Besakih in the early hours before dawn to climb to the summit of Gunung Agung. With them they had a buffalo, a goat, and a duck, along with other sacrificial offerings for the god of the sacred mountain. Half asleep, they stumbled in darkness across the treacherous ground of a recent ash flow and up a path winding through scrub and wasteland. As the sun emerged from behind the glowing outline of Mount Rinjani, visible across a lavender sea of water and cloud, they reached the site of Pura Pasar Agung, the highest temple on Gunung Agung, destroyed in the eruption of 1963. After stopping at a nearby spring to pray and sprinkle themselves with holy water, they proceeded toward the crater itself. Hauling and pushing the reluctant buffalo, perspiration mixing in their eyes with the gritty dust, they struggled up steep slopes of frustrating rock and ash. Collapsing to rest every few minutes, their hearts pounding and their breath coming in staccato gasps, they broke up into random groups, zigzagging across the final cone.

As they approached the crater, mist blew in, cutting them off from their usual surroundings and isolating them in an unreal world of blurred forms and deceptive shadows. Carefully watching out for a misstep that would plunge them to their own deaths, the men pulled the buffalo up to a crevice between two outcrops of rock on the rim itself. Gaps in the blowing cloud revealed wisps of smoke rising from the crater floor hundreds of feet below; changes in the direction of the wind brought the pungent smell of sulfur. Each person in the party approached the rim and paid homage to the god of Gunung Agung, whose presence they could feel swirling in the mists around them. While the officiating priest and his wife looked on, sanctifying the sacrifice, the men quickly shoved the gently mooing buffalo over the edge and threw the goat and duck after it, along with the other offerings. Then, their task completed,

everyone turned and scrabbled back down the mountain to the familiar realm of ordinary mortals, shining distinctly in the sun beneath a warm blue sky.

The ceremony on the summit of Gunung Agung, along with eight similar rituals conducted at various other sacred places in Bali, purified the environment of oceans, lakes, mountains, and heavens in preparation for the performance of the major sacrifice of Eka Dasa Rudra, held at Besakih itself on March 28. On the appointed day 200,000 people massed on the slopes of the sacred mountain to participate in the greatest religious ritual they would ever have the opportunity to witness. Although not a Hindu himself, President Suharto came with an entourage of high officials to express his government's tolerance and respect for the sanctity of all the diverse religions practiced in Indonesia. For this occasion the shrines and staircases of the temple glowed with ceremonial umbrellas and streamers of brightly colored cloth, made all the more striking by the black pagoda towers rising like somber mountains above them.

Intoning mantras and chanting hymns of praise, twenty-three high priests – the most ever to gather in one place – performed rituals over the offerings of numerous animals sacrificed the previous day. They called on Sanghyang Widhi Wasa, the supreme deity in all his myriad manifestations, including his lofty form as the god of the sacred mountain, to bestow his blessings and restore peace and harmony throughout the universe. Invoking him as Shiva, the wrathful lord of destructive forces, they offered the sacrifices spread before them as gifts to placate and purify the demons hidden within every human being – the passions, illusions, envy, and hatred that relentlessly afflict the world with misery and suffering. This time the god of Gunung Agung seemed to approve their actions and hearken to their entreaties: the volcano did not erupt.[19]

Images of Shiva and Meru play important roles in various systems of meditation found in South and Southeast Asia. As a means of attaining unity with the underlying reality of the cosmos, practitioners of Hindu and Buddhist yoga often visualize the universe as one with their bodies. In their visualizations they identify the central axis of Mount Meru with a channel that rises from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Spaced along this channel lie centers of energy called *chakras* or "wheels." Symbolized by lotus blossoms with different numbers of petals, they control the various emotional and spiritual states that people experience in daily life as well as meditation. By activating them one after the other in the practice of yoga, a Hindu climbs the symbolic mountain within his body to merge with Shiva on the summit of Kailas, visualized as a thousand-petalled lotus on the crown of his head. Buddhist practitioners also visualize the central channel as Mount Meru, but they attain the heights of spiritual realization through union with a Buddhist, rather than a Hindu, deity. For Hindus the goal of the inner ascent is to become one with the true self,

symbolized by Shiva; for Buddhists it is to awaken to the empty nature of reality, embodied in a Buddha.[20]

The tantric systems of meditation that make use of these visualizations are esoteric and difficult to comprehend. Although we cannot follow the intricacies of their practice, they suggest the more general significance of mountains in South and Southeast Asia. According to these systems, the deities we see enshrined on sacred peaks actually reside within ourselves as expressions of our own true nature, however we may conceive of it – as the true self, God, or emptiness. The inner symbolism of the footprint on Adam's Peak and the cosmic axis in Gunung Agung leads us to the personal realization that what we seek, the center of meaning in our lives, lies right here in the place where we stand. If we can know that place as it truly is, if we can recognize the sacred mountain within ourselves, we can, as in the Eka Dasa Rudra ceremony, exorcise the inner demons of our illusions and find the balance and harmony we need to live in peace.

SIX

THE MIDDLE EAST

Heights of Revelation

As supreme sites of divine power and revelation, the mountains of the Middle East have influenced the course of Western civilization, shaping the values of millions of people throughout the world. One mountain, Mount Sinai, is inextricably associated with the Ten Commandments, the basis of law and ethics in modern society. Another, Mount Zion, embodies the messianic vision that has inspired the highest ideals and aspirations of the Western world. Events on the heights of other mountains have played a major role in the lives of prophets and founders of three major religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although many of these mountains serve as places of pilgrimage, they assume an even greater importance in works of religious literature, where they stand out as sublime symbols of the mind and spirit.

The mountains of the Middle East range from the lofty volcanoes of Iran and Turkey in the west and north to the harsh desert peaks of Sinai and Saudi Arabia in the east and south. The northern end of the Great Rift, a fracture in the earth's crust that runs down to Africa, divides the well-watered hills of Israel and Lebanon from the drier ranges of Jordan and Syria. Scattered among these mountains – on their heights and in the flood plains between them – lie the ruins of some of the most ancient civilizations known to history – those of Sumer, Babylon, and Canaan. Discoveries of clay tablets dating back to the third millennium BCE show that since the earliest recorded times sacred hills and peaks have played important roles in the religions and cultures of the Middle East.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest surviving work of epic literature, speaks of a journey through an awesome mountain guarding the approach to the garden of the sun and the secret of immortality. Although the people of Sumer and Babylon who composed this work lived on the flat plains of Mesopotamia, far from mountainous regions, the hazy images of distant peaks beyond the horizon influenced their conceptions of the world around them. They built great temples of bricks, called ziggurats, in the form of stepped pyramids that mimicked the role of sacred mountains, linking the earth to the sky and providing a place for mortals to communicate with the gods. The names of some of these temples – Assur, "House, the Mountain of the Universe," and Larsa, "House, Link of Heaven and Earth" – suggest an underlying identification with a mythic peak at the center of the cosmos. Modern scholars disagree over whether ziggurats were actually viewed as mountains, but most of them agree that they did function as cosmic centers connecting various spheres of existence. In any case, the Tower of Babel in the well-known story of the Bible appears as an enormous ziggurat in the shape of a human-made mountain.[1]

Unlike the low-lying plains of the Tigris and Euphrates, the land of ancient Canaan to the west, where the modern states of Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan now lie, is mountainous. Here, where the people lived among hills and valleys, the influence of sacred mountains on their religious traditions is much more apparent. Clay tablets inscribed in the second millennium BCE and found near the ancient city of Ugarit in 1929 speak of a number of Canaanite gods closely associated with prominent peaks. The two most important, El and Baal, had their own mountains, on whose summits they dwelled and where shrines were built to worship them. Seated on the throne of his peak, as a king in the splendor of his royal tent, El would call the gods together to make decisions and issue divine decrees. The waters that flowed from the paradise on the summit of his mountain brought life and fertility to the world below. The dwelling of Baal, the other great deity, was an awesome peak where, wrapped in thunder and lightning, he fought great battles and celebrated his victories over the lesser gods of the Canaanite pantheon. The name of Baal's mountain appears in the Old Testament as Zaphon, which became the Hebrew word for *north*, the direction in which it lay in relation to Jerusalem. A younger, more virile god of war and fertility, he eventually wrested sovereignty from El and reigned supreme over the hills of Canaan, the promised land to which Moses led the Children of Israel. Although the prophets who followed Moses attacked the worship of these deities, modern scholars have shown how the mountains of Baal and El influenced biblical conceptions of Mount Sinai and Zion.[2]

The land that the Hebrews took from the Canaanites around 1,200 BCE lay for the most part on mountainous heights overlooking the Mediterranean to the west and the Dead Sea to the east. There, like an oasis suspended above the shimmering

heat of the surrounding lowlands, they found a country of pleasant hills and valleys – cool, green, and well-watered. After their years of wandering in the harsh and sterile wilderness of Sinai, the mountains of Israel appeared to them as an earthly paradise, a land flowing with milk and honey. Clusters of moist grapes, shade trees heavy with olives, meadows of smooth grass: all that they had longed for in the desert sands lay waiting for them as gifts from heaven, where the hills received the blessings of God in the form of soft rain from the sky. Rugged enough to block the passage of war chariots from the plains, but not too rugged to graze and cultivate, the mountains offered a natural fortress and sanctuary where they could live, at last, in peace and plenty. Moreover, the sight of their massive summits set firmly around the horizon provided a constant reminder of the eternal presence of God, watching over his people and protecting them from their enemies. As the 125th Psalm so beautifully puts it:

> They that trust in the Lord
> Are as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abides forever.
> As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,
> So the Lord is round about His people from this time forth and forever.[3]

From the beginning mountains have been central to the experience of the holy land in Judaism. The Old Testament abounds with passages extolling their goodness and beauty. In Deuteronomy Moses implores God to grant him a view of the land denied to him: "Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and [Mount] Lebanon." The Psalms, in particular, express deep feelings of affection for mountainous heights and the virtues that flow from them, such as peace and righteousness:

> Let the mountains bear peace to the people
> And the little hills through righteousness.[4]

Something about the long smooth sweep of their ridges, the way their crests mark the edge of the sky, gives the mountains of Israel an impression of height that far exceeds their actual altitude. The sight of them leads the mind naturally to thoughts of the Creator, who dwells in the heights of heaven above and beyond them. In the famous words of the 121st Psalm:

> I will lift up my eyes to the mountains:
> From where shall my help come?
> My help comes from the Lord,
> Who made heaven and earth.[5]

Many of the most important events in the Bible and the history of Judaism are closely associated with mountains. As the source of four rivers, including the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Garden of Eden lies, by implication, on the heights

of a hill or mountain. In fact, the prophet Ezekiel refers to it as "the holy mountain of God." The three most important events in the Old Testament, the covenants between God and his people, are all associated with mountains. In the story of the flood, Noah's ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat, the first point of land to emerge from the waters that have covered the earth. Here God makes the first covenant, sealing it with the sign of a rainbow: he promises never to destroy the world by water again, no matter how evil its creatures may become.[6]

The second covenant takes place on the summit of Mount Moriah: there, in one of the most powerful and poignant scenes in the Bible, God commands Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, to build an altar and offer up his son in sacrifice. When Abraham raises up his knife to slay Isaac, an angel stays his hand and says:

> By myself have I sworn, says the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice.[7]

The successful passage of this terrible test on top of a mountain forms a pivotal event in the sacred history of Judaism: it confirms the promise God has made with Abraham and his descendants, thereby assuring the future of the Jewish people and their religion. It is significant that when God appears to Abraham he refers to himself as El Shaddai, "the One of the Mountain."[8]

The third covenant, the most important single event in the traditional history of Judaism, takes place on Mount Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain to converse with God and receive the Torah, the divine law that makes of his people a true nation and marks the actual beginning of the Jewish religion. The earlier incident of the Burning Bush, in which God first reveals himself to Moses and commands him to deliver the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, occurs on the slopes of Mount Sinai. In a later part of the Bible, the prophet Elijah comes to this mountain to hear God speak to him in a still, small voice – a tiny echo of the thunder with which he had spoken to Moses.

Other mountains also play significant roles in the lives of Elijah and Moses. In a famous episode that reflects the triumph of Judaism over the Canaanite worship of mountain gods, Elijah defeats the priests of Baal in a contest on Mount Carmel in which he calls down fire to burn offerings on the sacred mountain. A broad ridge rising over the Mediterranean, Carmel served as a popular retreat for hermits and inspired, at a much later date, the Carmelite Order of the Catholic Church. At the end of Deuteronomy, after years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses climbs to the top of a mountain to see the Promised Land before passing away, alone with God on the heights of Mount Nebo.

As we will see in more detail, Mount Zion in later books of the Bible replaces Mount Sinai as the mountain where God makes his will known to the people of Israel. David establishes his city on a hill next to it, and his son Solomon builds the temple on the traditional site of Mount Moriah, which, along with the city of Jerusalem, becomes identified with Zion. The great tragedies of ancient Jewish history, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple and the diaspora of the Jewish people, almost all take place on hills in the vicinity of this mountain. Prophets such as Isaiah foretell the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of God on the summit of Mount Zion. Finally, in recent times, the Zionist movement that resulted in the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 took its name and inspiration from the sacred mountain that embodies the ideals and hopes of the Jewish people.

One mountain is especially sacred to the Samaritans, followers of a closely related religion that split off from Judaism around the twelfth century BCE. Rising above the present-day town of Nablus in the West Bank, Mount Gerizim appears in the Bible as the Mountain of Blessing across the valley from Mount Ebal, the Mountain of Cursing. The Samaritans adhere to a strict form of monotheism with one God; one prophet, Moses; one holy book, their version of the five books of Moses; and only one sacred place, Mount Gerizim. For them, the mountain is the true site of Moses' revelation on Mount Sinai and the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. They hold that the Ark of the Covenant rests not on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem but lies hidden somewhere on Mount Gerizim near the ruins of a Samaritan temple destroyed centuries ago. Today 300 Samaritans live on the sacred mountain, with another 300 near Tel Aviv – a tiny remnant of a once much more numerous people. With their high priest officiating in robes and a red turban, they celebrate Passover on Mount Gerizim, but unlike Jews, they follow the ancient ritual of actually sacrificing sheep on the holiday marking the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. When I visited the mountain to do research, my Samaritan colleague Benyamin Tsedaka showed me long rows of sacrificial pits with hooks to hang the roasting carcasses. Taking me to the summit of Mount Gerizim, he pointed out a natural channel the length of a human body worn into a rock slab where tradition says that Abraham placed his son to offer him up in sacrifice.[9]

The mountains of the Middle East have played an important role in Christianity. Many of the major events in the life of Jesus in the New Testament take place on hills and mountaintops. At the beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism by John the Baptist, he passes the final test of his spirituality, the last and greatest of his temptations, on top of a mountain:

> Again, the devil took him up into an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And

> said to him, All these things will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Then said Jesus to him, Get you hence, Satan.[10]

After he has begun to teach, Jesus climbs a hill near the Sea of Galilee to deliver the most important and influential teaching in the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount. This discourse, which begins with the well-known words "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven," has as its implicit model the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai – for Jesus has come to fulfill the old law and institute a new one.[11]

Another significant event, the transfiguration that confirms Jesus as the Son of God in the Christian tradition, also takes place on a mountain – traditionally Mount Tabor near Nazareth. There, just as Moses was transformed on Sinai so that his face shone with a divine light, so is Jesus. The older prophet even appears in person to bear witness to this affinity between himself and his divine successor:

> And after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face shone as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elias talking with him.[12]

God then speaks out of a cloud, as he did on Mount Sinai, to announce: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."[13]

The final, crucial events of Jesus' life and death center on hills and mountains. His crucifixion takes place on the hilltop of Mount Calvary or Golgotha, the place of the skull. Christian tradition makes this place the center of the world and the summit of a cosmic mountain linking earth to heaven. After his resurrection, at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus appears to eleven of his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. There, in his final act, he bids them to spread his teachings to all the nations throughout the world. Although the Gospels do not specify this, traditional accounts maintain that he ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives.[14]

Although later Christian theologians in Western Europe cast aspersions on mountains as demonic disfigurations of the earth, the early Christians of the New Testament clearly regarded them in a positive light, as places of miracles and divine revelation. This view continued among the monks and hermits of the Eastern Orthodox Church, who sought to find God in the solitude of mountain hermitages. The ninth century writings of Theodore, Abbot of the Monastery of Studios in Constantinople, express the high regard in which he held mountains and reveal the importance of their symbolism for him and others of his faith:

> It seems to me that a mountain is an image of the soul as it lifts itself up in contemplation. For in the same manner as the mountain towers above the valleys and lowlands at its foot, so does the soul of him who prays mount into the higher regions up to God . . . Jesus himself, our divine king,

> ascended the mountain, that he might send up his prayer after the manner of men.[15]

Sacred mountains also appear in Islam, the other major religion of Middle Eastern origin. In the Muslim tradition they play an important role in mystical writings and practices having to do with stages of the path leading to spiritual absorption in Allah, or God. However, they are also associated with events of great importance in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, who founded Islam in the seventh century CE. A caravan merchant who lived in the vicinity of Mecca, he would go alone to seek spiritual solace in a rocky cave on Mount Hira, a nearby hill of sun-scorched sand and stone. There, on a fateful night in the fortieth year of his life, known thereafter as the Night of Glory, the Archangel Gabriel appeared before him and said:

> Read! In the name of your Lord who created:
> He created man from a clinging form [or, clot of blood].
> Read! and Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One,
> who taught by the pen,
> who taught man what he knew not.[16]

With these commanding words came the first of an extraordinary series of revelations that became the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam. Fearing that he might be possessed by an evil spirit, Muhammad fled down the mountain, but the angel stopped him and told him that he had indeed been designated the Messenger of God. The religion that he founded, based on revelations that began on Mount Hira, swept swiftly across Asia to reach the far-off islands of the Pacific and to become the major rival of Christianity as the faith of millions throughout the world.

Muhammad viewed Islam as the culmination of the Jewish and Christian religions, from which he drew much of his inspiration. Regarded by Muslims as the seal, or last, of the prophets, he took a great interest in his biblical predecessors. A number of passages in the Qur'an refer to Moses and the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. One that shows the influence of later Jewish legend and commentary tells how Allah suspended the mountain over the Children of Israel and commanded them to hold fast to the teachings he had given them through Moses. In the rabbinic account God holds Mount Sinai over their heads and threatens to bury them under its massive bulk if they do not accept the Torah and obey its commandments. In both versions the image of the mountain conveys the awesome power and glory of the Lord before whom all must submit. And, indeed, Islam, the name of the Muslim religion, means submission – to the merciful will of Allah.[17]

The Temple Mount centered around Mount Moriah, the site of the ancient Temple of Solomon and the place where according to Jewish tradition God

commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, served as the point of earthly departure for Muhammad's celebrated night journey to heaven. According to accounts of the Prophet's life, he traveled with the Archangel Gabriel in a single night from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he met Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. Then, mounting on a winged steed, he flew up through seven heavens to a tree that marks the limit of all knowledge, beyond which lies the inscrutable mystery of God. There, he received the revelation that contains the central creed of Islam.[18]

On his final pilgrimage, shortly before his death, Muhammad went to Jabal al-Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy, just outside Mecca, and according to tradition told his followers, "Truly, all Muslims are brothers." There he received the revelation of the last verse inscribed in the Qur'an: "This day I have perfected your religion for you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." As part of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims go to stand at the Mount of Mercy, commemorating the brotherhood of their faith and their commitment to the teachings of Islam. According to Islamic legend, after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the parents of the human race, came together and "knew" each other on the plain of Arafat beneath the sacred mountain.[19]

Al-Ghazali, one of the greatest theologians and mystics of the Islamic religion, used the image of a mountain to symbolize the relationship between human beings and the realm of the spirit. Around the end of the eleventh century, long after Islam had become a well-established religion, he wrote:

> If among the objects of the world of the spirit there is something fixed and unalterable, great and illimitable, something from which the beams of revelation, the streams of knowledge, pour into the mind like water into a valley, it is to be symbolized by a *mountain*. If the beings who receive these revelations are of differing ranks, they are to be symbolized by a *valley*; and if these beams of revelation reach the minds of men, and pass on from mind to mind, then these minds are likewise to be symbolized by *valleys*.[20]

The tradition of Sufi mysticism to which Al-Ghazali turned in the latter part of his life speaks of Qaf, a mythical range of mountains that surrounds the earth like a great ring. In the writings and visions of Muslim mystics, this mountain range symbolizes the impassable barrier that stands between the world of matter and the inconceivable realm of the spirit. There, beyond its transcendent heights lies the throne of the most high, the glorious presence of God that only those who abandon all worldly attachments and take the Sufi path to its very end can ever hope to attain. *The Conference of the Birds*, a poetic allegory composed by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar in the twelfth century and often compared to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, describes the journey of a group of

birds who follow this path over the mountains of Qaf, seeking a king who turns out to be a divine reflection of their own true nature. Some have sought to identify the mythical range of Sufi mysticism with the Caucasus Mountains, the boundary of the known world for the ancient Greeks.[21]

Muslims appear to have borrowed both the name of *Qaf* and the idea of a ring of mountains surrounding the world from the ancient cosmology of Iran. Texts incorporating material dating from the time of Zarathustra, the Iranian prophet who founded the religion of Zoroastrianism around 1000 BCE, speak of Hara Berezaiti or Elburz, the first mountain to stand upon the flat disc of the earth. Actually a range of mountains, it encircles the rim of the world and rises up to the heights of heaven. From the roots that it extends underground, one of its peaks, the Peak of Hara, has grown up like a plant to form the mountain at the center of the earth. The stars, moon, and sun circle around this peak as they do around Mount Meru, the cosmic axis of Indian mythology. Indeed, the two mountains probably have a common ancestor in the myths of the Indo-European peoples who settled both Iran and India during the second millennium BCE. One of the subranges that grows out of Elburz is called in Zoroastrian texts the "Mountain of Qaf," leading some later authors to identify Qaf with Elburz itself.[22]

From the summit of the Peak of Hara, the highest point on earth, the Chinvat Bridge arches up to heaven. According to Zoroastrian teachings, over its narrow span, suspended above a terrifying abyss, the souls of the dead must pass. There, they receive their final judgement. Those who have sinned lose their balance and plunge into the depths of hell, to be tormented by demons and ghosts who remind them of the evil they have wrought. Those who have been virtuous are greeted by a beautiful maiden, who embodies all the good deeds they have done. Drawn by the sweet scent of paradise, they follow her up into the realm of the infinite lights of heaven. Zoroastrian preoccupations with the struggle between good and evil – and the eventual triumph of the former over the latter – strongly influenced the development of messianic ideas in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[23]

DAMAVAND AND ARARAT

The two highest mountains of the Middle East, Damavand and Ararat, have drawn to themselves, like mist and clouds, the stories and myths of the ancient past. Extinct volcanoes, they rise in soaring cones of white and grey to float like visions from another realm poised high above the surrounding world. Streaked with lines of snow, the tapered summit of Damavand hangs in the sky at 18,406 feet, visible from Tehran, the capital of Iran, forty miles away. Towering 4,000 feet higher than its companion cone of Little Ararat in the Armenian region of eastern Turkey, Ararat reaches an altitude

of 16,854 feet. With nothing close to them in height, no other summits to distract the attention, Ararat and Damavand possess an overwhelming presence that compels the eye to regard them and only them. Seeking the mountains of their myths, the ancients naturally turned to these, the highest peaks in the world they knew.

Damavand, and more particularly the range of which it forms the most impressive peak, became the Elburz or Hara Berezaiti of Zoroastrian mythology – the cosmic mountain surrounding the earth and rising from its center to surpass the stars. There, somewhere on the heights of the Elburz Mountains, grew the white haoma plant, which produced the elixir of immortality. There, too, beyond the reach of darkness, cold, and night, lay the hidden source of the divine river bringing the waters of life to the world below. With the waning of Zoroastrianism and the coming of Islam, Damavand became the setting of more mundane stories and legends, many of which have their origins in much older myths of ancient Iran. According to the one most commonly told in recent times, an evil king named Zohak required the sacrifice of young men to feed snakes growing out of his shoulders. A hero named Feridun, who had grown up in the safety of the Elburz, came down from his alpine refuge to defeat the tyrant and imprison him in a cavern on Mount Damavand, where he chained him to the living rock. According to local legend, whenever Zohak groans and writhes within his mountain prison, the volcano rumbles and shakes as if about to erupt.[24]

Like a ship seeking a place to land, the biblical story of Noah's ark came to rest on the summit of Mount Ararat. Although some have looked to Damavand or the high peaks of western Iran, most traditional authorities have identified the lofty volcano of eastern Turkey as the mountain that first emerged from the receding waters of the flood. The Book of Genesis describes the event in the following words:

> And the waters receded from the earth continually, and after the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters abated. And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat.

The word *Ararat* refers to a country or region and comes, in fact, from Urartu, the name of an ancient civilization that thrived during biblical times in the vicinity of the mountain now traditionally identified as the place where the ark landed. The Bible only mentions Ararat in two other passages, where it makes it clear that it is speaking of a land and kingdom.[25]

Noah and his fellow passengers descended from the heights to repopulate the world, making Ararat the site of the second creation. The theme of a high peak as the first piece of land to emerge from a flood, the place from which life begins again, has a peculiar power and fascination: it appears in myths from regions as

diverse and scattered as the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, and North America. On one level the story of the biblical deluge probably has its origins in memories of floods that inundated centers of Mesopotamian civilization in the low-lying areas between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. On another, deeper level it reflects a longing to sweep away the past and begin again, to cleanse the world and make it new. Because of its deep and widespread appeal, the story of Noah's ark has made Mount Ararat one of the most famous, and intriguing, mountains in the world – despite the fact that the Bible gives it only the briefest mention.

Mount Ararat has also become, for the Armenian people, a symbol of their homeland and national identity. For centuries they have viewed it not only as the resting place of Noah's ark, but also as the center of the world, around which they were privileged to dwell. Dispersed in various parts of the world, many of them still remember with longing the sacred mountain of Armenia, called Masis in the language of their fathers. A number of villages and other features around Mount Ararat bear names relating them to events in the story of the flood: the site where Noah built an altar to make sacrifices after descending from the mountain, the vineyard where he planted the first grapes, the place where he buried his wife. The Armenians of the past regarded the mountain with such veneration that they believed no one could ever reach its holy summit.[26]

An old story tells of an Armenian monk who so desired to venerate the ark that he tried to climb Mount Ararat three times. Each time, after struggling up to a great height, he would fall inexorably asleep, only to wake up and find himself back at the foot of the mountain. On his third attempt an angel entered his dreams and told him that God had decreed that no mortal should ever step on the summit where Noah had alighted to renew the human race. However, in recognition of the monk's devotion, the angel brought down a piece of the ark and placed it on his breast. A relic preserved at the ancient monastery of Echmiadzin in the thirteenth century was said to be that piece of wood. A small chapel built on the site of the monk's dream was destroyed in an earthquake that buried it and other monastic buildings under an avalanche of rock in 1840.

Visible from great distances, looming over intervening ridges and plains, the summits of Damavand and Ararat appear, at first sight, impossibly high and remote. Until modern times the idea of climbing them seemed to the local people the height of folly. But aside from the thin air of high altitude and the drudgery of struggling up endless slopes of loose rock, sliding ash, and soft snow, their ascent actually poses little difficulty, especially for mountaineers accustomed to climbing more precipitous peaks in the Alps. An Englishman named W. T. Thomson made the first ascent of Damavand in 1837. Frederic Parrot, a Russian doctor, succeeded in reaching the summit of Ararat in 1829, but the local people, and even his European companions, refused to believe

that he had climbed the sacred mountain. When James Bryce reported his own ascent of Ararat nearly fifty years later to the Archimandrate of Echmiadzin, the monastery with the reputed relic of Noah's ark, the Armenian prelate replied, with a gracious smile, "No, that cannot be. No one has ever been there. It is impossible."[27]

MOUNT SINAI

The two most important sacred mountains in the Middle East are neither the highest nor the most impressive. One, Mount Sinai, rises to an altitude of less than 9,000 feet. The other, Mount Zion, is scarcely more than a rounded hill. But despite their lack of physical height and imposing demeanor, the two tower spiritually over all other mountains of the Middle East. The image of God's descent in fire and cloud on Mount Sinai is burned into the minds of millions throughout the world as *the* paradigm of humankind's confrontation with the awesome power and majesty of the sacred. It occupies a place of distinction as one of the most impressive and influential images in all religious history and literature.

In the Jewish tradition Mount Sinai marks the site of the most important covenant made between God and the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments issued as part of this covenant form the basis for much of Western law and civilization. What happened on Mount Sinai over 3,000 years ago had a power that keeps it alive today, making it central to the ongoing history and practice of Judaism. The following passage from a biblical commentary used in many synagogues reveals the significance for contemporary Jews of the covenant made on the sacred mountain of the distant past:

> The arrival at the foot of Mt. Sinai marks the beginning of Israel's spiritual history. We reach what was the kernel and core of the nation's life, the Covenant by which all the tribes were united in allegiance to One God, the Covenant by which a priest-people was created, and a Kingdom of God on earth inaugurated among the children of men.[28]

The Bible itself provides a vivid picture of the sacred mountain and what transpired on its awesome heights. After leading the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, Moses brought them through the wilderness to the foot of Mount Sinai. There they camped to await the will of God. The Book of Exodus continues:

> And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of a ram's horn (*shofar)* exceedingly loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of

> the camp to meet God; and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the voice of the ram's horn waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice. And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mount; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.[29]

The passage provides a dramatic setting to highlight two movements in opposite directions. God comes down and Moses goes up. They meet at the top of Mount Sinai. The mountain reveals the presence of the Lord and serves as the meeting place between God and human, the sacred and the profane. In the powerful image of Mount Sinai, we find the resolution of two profound, but opposite, inclinations that define the poles of much of religious thought and practice throughout the world: the impulse to rely on personal effort and the need to depend on divine grace. On the summit of the sacred mountain, the two come together as one. God calls and humans respond.

If we look closely at the passage, we find that it does not describe the physical appearance of Mount Sinai – the shape of its ridges or the texture of its rock. It focuses instead on the transformation of the mountain: the fire and smoke, the thunder and cloud that envelop it to reveal the awesome presence of God. Mount Sinai becomes charged with the electricity of a divine power that renders it lethal to all but Moses and a select few judged worthy to set foot on its lower slopes. Some have attempted to explain the biblical passages as a description of a volcano erupting, but a thunderstorm would just as easily fit the picture of a peak enshrouded in fire and cloud. In any case, whatever the physical explanation, we have here a classic example of a hierophany – an eruption of the sacred, or the experience of the sacred, into the profane world of ordinary reality.

Moses first experiences such a hierophany in the famous episode of the burning bush, which takes place at the foot of Mount Sinai. Grazing his flocks on the side of Horeb, the Mountain of God, he comes across a bush that burns but is not consumed. When he turns aside to see this wonder, the voice of God speaks out of the fire and commands him to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt. The Bible implicitly identifies Horeb with Sinai since the passage adds, "When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain" – the place where Moses will receive the Ten Commandments. Like Mount Sinai, the bush burns with a miraculous fire that reveals the presence of the sacred. In both cases a feature of the natural landscape is transformed into a conduit of supernatural power and glory, a means by which God may communicate with humans.[30]

For all its emphasis on what happened on Mount Sinai, the Bible leaves no clear indication of where the mountain lies. It tells us only that the Children of

Israel went into the wilderness of Sinai and that "It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea" – but no one has been able to identify Mount Seir. As a result, various religious traditions and scholarly conjectures have sprung up, each proposing its own candidate for the sacred mountain. Some believe Moses met God not far from the crossing of the Red Sea, on Jebel Helal in the northern part of the Sinai. Early Christians looked, instead, to the more dramatic peaks of Jebel Serbal and Jebel Musa near the southern tip of the peninsula. One archaeologist has deduced evidence pointing to a low butte in the Negev, where numerous ancient artifacts have been found, indicating a long history of cultic activity. The Jewish tradition itself has shown remarkably little interest in the actual site of the sacred mountain.[31]

The story of the Exodus reveals part of the reason for this lack of interest – why Mount Sinai never became an established place of pilgrimage for Jews. God commanded the Children of Israel to build a tabernacle to hold the Ark of the Covenant so that he might come down from the mountain and travel with them to the promised land. As Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, wrote in the first century, "God also desired that a tent should be built for Him, in which He would condescend to meet them, and which could also be carried with them on their journey, so that in the future it would no longer be necessary to ascend Mount Sinai, since He himself would descend into the tent and in that very place would hear their prayers." From that time forward, the Jews never felt a need to return to the mountain, for God had left it to come with them to the holy land of Israel. Unlike mountains such as Fuji, which are sacred in their own right, Sinai derived its sanctity from the divine presence that descended on its summit. When that presence departed, the physical mountain lost its significance.[32]

As the site of the most important event in the history of Judaism, the image of Sinai, however, lived on in the memory of the Jewish people as a powerful symbol of the covenant that God had made with them. Moses himself impressed upon his followers the importance of remembering the sacred mountain and what it signified:

> Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your children, and your children's children; the day that you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, when the Lord said to me: 'Assemble the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children.' And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire up to the heart of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire.[33]

For Jews – and Christians – the image of the fiery revelation on Mount Sinai helped to endow the Ten Commandments with a divine stature that compelled people of later generations to preserve and observe their precepts.

As a mountain of memory, Sinai acquired a transcendent reality that enabled it to overcome the limitations of space and time so that the thunder of its message could continue to reverberate in the hearts and minds of Jews, wherever they might find themselves. The very uncertainty of its location served to enhance the aura of mystery that enshrouded the peak and made it such a powerful force in the Jewish tradition. Identified with no particular place or feature of the material world, Mount Sinai could assume a spiritual majesty and grandeur limited only by the human imagination. Above all, the lack of fixed location placed it in another realm beyond reach and prevented the mountain from succumbing to the evils of idolatry. Since no one could say for sure where it lay, no physical mountain could ever become a substitute for the spiritual peak of revelation that it embodied. Just as no one knew the site of Moses' grave, where he met his death, so no one knew the location of the true Mount Sinai, where he met God. The mystery that surrounded the two kept a cult of Jewish worship from developing around either one.

The early Christians, however, sought to find the blessings of God's revelation at the actual site of Mount Sinai. Drawn by the awesome landscape and the spiritual power they felt there, wandering monks and hermits began in the third century CE to congregate around Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses, a remote and rocky peak hidden among the highest and most spectacular mountains of the Sinai Peninsula. A perfect setting for inducing the visionary experiences of solitary contemplation, it rises to 7,497 feet above a haunting wilderness of shadowed ravines and twisting ridges. Rounded summits of reddish-brown granite, sculpted and scoured by wind and water, blasted and burned by sand and sun, give the mountain the appearance of having gone through the hardening fires of a cosmic furnace. The eerie, primordial quality of the barren landscape, swept clean of all contaminating influences, evokes a sense of the pure and timeless place where Moses conversed with God.

The presence of holy men communing with God on the sacred mountain attracted monks and pilgrims, who came in increasing numbers to partake of the spiritual atmosphere surrounding Mount Sinai. The writings of one such pilgrim reveal the kind of inner force that impelled him and others to make the difficult journey to the desert peak: "A powerful longing towards Sinai seized me, and neither with my bodily eyes nor with those of the spirit could I find joy in anything, so strongly was I attracted to that place of solitude."[34] By the beginning of the fourth century, hermits living in simple caves and huts scattered among the rocks and crags had established a monastic community and identified features of the local landscape connected with the story of Moses,

such as the site of the burning bush and the place where the Golden Calf had stood.

Bloody massacres by roving bands of desert marauders interfered with the contemplative life of Mount Sinai. Fed up with these unsettling distractions, the monks finally appealed to the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian I, for protection. In the middle of the sixth century, he had a fortified monastery built on the reputed site of the burning bush at the base of the mountain. Later on, around the eleventh century, after the Arabs had gained control of the region, a mosque constructed beside the church within the compound appeased the Muslims and guaranteed the survival of the Christian monastery. The monks also used a document attributed to Muhammad to persuade the Muslim rulers of Sinai that the Prophet had granted them the divine protection of Islam itself.

Originally named the Church of the Transfiguration, in memory of the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor in the presence of Moses and Elijah, who had themselves been transfigured with light on Mount Sinai, Justinian's monastery acquired in the eleventh century another name, the one by which most people know it today – the Monastery of Saint Catherine. A woman of noble family who converted to Christianity in the fourth century, Saint Catherine was martyred for her beliefs in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. According to tradition, angels carried her body to the top of Jebel Katerina or Mount Catherine, the highest peak in the Sinai Peninsula. Three centuries later monks found her remains there and brought them down to the monastery. When some of these relics went to France in the eleventh century, her cult spread rapidly through Europe and made her final resting place at the foot of Mount Sinai famous as the Monastery of Saint Catherine.

Along with the fame of its saint, the influence of the desert monastery swept far beyond the isolated mountains of Sinai. Numerous monasteries in Eastern Europe adopted the contemplative tradition of Mount Sinai, in which monks withdrew to the solitude of mountain hermitages to cleanse themselves of sin and seek perfection in spiritual union with Jesus. The writings of major figures connected with Saint Catherine's deeply influenced meditative thought and practice in the Eastern Orthodox Church. John Climacus, an early abbot of the monastery, wrote *The Ladder to Paradise*, a famous guide for monks describing the steps of the spiritual path leading from renunciation of the world to the attainment of peace in the perfect love of God. The stone staircase of some 3,000 steps rising up from St. Catherine's to the higher reaches of Mount Sinai may have provided a model for John's image of a divine ladder reaching to heaven. In any case, Gregory of Sinai, who did much to inculcate these ideals in Eastern Europe in the fourteenth century, made it a religious practice to climb every day to the top of the mountain where Moses had come into the presence of God.[35]

Figure 8 The Eastern Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine's on the traditional site of the burning bush at the foot of Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses, in the Sinai. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

The monastery built by Justinian in the sixth century stands today as one of the oldest surviving Christian monasteries in the world. Massive walls of granite blocks enclose a rectangular compound filled with a church, mosque, numerous chapels, a library, archives, courtyards, and living quarters for monks. A chapel sits on the site of the burning bush, whose miracle Christian tradition compares with that of the Virgin Mary, who in conceiving Jesus was also infused with the blazing power of God. A magnificent mosaic imbedded in the apse of the church depicts in a golden glow the transfiguration of Jesus with Moses and Elijah standing to either side. The monastery itself serves as a repository of one of the greatest collections of Byzantine art and literature to be found anywhere in the world – a treasure house of priceless icons, ancient manuscripts, and beautiful mosaics.

When I met with Archbishop Damianos, the Greek Orthodox Abbot of St. Catherine's, he expressed concern about the impact of tourism on the environment and on the practice of religion by his monks. In the late 1980s the Egyptian government announced plans to build a cable car up Mount Sinai and put a casino on the summit. When word of the scheme got out in 1990, people from all over the world expressed outrage at what they considered crass exploitation and desecration of a mountain that functions as

a prime place of revelation and symbol of ethical values in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. *Time* published an essay titled "Trashing Mount Sinai" that decried the proposed development and ended with the following comment: "Perhaps they will make the cable cars in the shape of calves and gild them. The golden calves can slide up and down Mount Sinai and show God who won." The public outcry forced the Egyptian government to abandon the project. There was, however, an example of culturally appropriate tourist development just down the valley from the monastery: a hotel for tourists was constructed on the traditional site of the making of the Golden Calf.[36]

I asked the Abbot why he believed Jebel Musa, among all the competing candidates, was the Mount Sinai of the Bible. He replied that there were two possible reasons – one mystical, the other logical. The first reason for choosing Jebel Musa was that one or more of the desert fathers meditating at the foot of the mountain may have had a vision that this was the place where Moses met God. The second, logical reason was that the revelation and covenant would have made such an impression on the ancestors of the Bedouin people living in the area that they would have passed the memory of it down through the centuries as a tradition that eventually reached the Christian monks who came to Jebel Musa over 1,000 years later.

The visitor who looks up from contemplating works of inspiring art in St. Catherine's beholds above the spiritual treasures of the heights – the monumental peaks of Sinai, arranged like colossal altars beneath the sky. Long ago monks laboriously carved a stairway of stone steps that climb steeply up through ravines and crags to emerge in a beautiful little valley hidden beneath the summit of Jebel Musa itself. An arch of stone near the top of the stairs marks the place where a sixth-century monk took confessions and turned back those whose sins, he felt, would cause their deaths if they should venture onto the holy ground above. Just beyond this arch, to the pilgrim's surprise, he or she comes upon an enormous cypress with thick green boughs, strangely out of place in the rocky wilderness surrounding it. Close by the tree, not far from a spring, stands a simple hut of stone with whitewashed walls, marking the spot where according to Christian tradition Elijah heard the still, small voice of God after the thunderous roar of wind and storm. An atmosphere of profound peace settles over the pilgrims, removing them from the cares of the outside world and preparing them for the summit of the sacred mountain.

A steep climb up the final slopes of naked rock took me and my family to a small chapel set precariously on the very top of Mount Sinai. We rented blankets from a Bedouin and spent the night out in a nearby spot sheltered from the wind. Shortly after the last remnant of dusk, my son,

David, pointed down and exclaimed, "You have to take a picture of that!" I looked down to see light from a Bedouin village bursting out of a narrow canyon, like the fires of hell issuing from the earth to receive the worshippers of the Golden Calf. Awakened a few hours later by the sound of pilgrims climbing up in the night, we rose to watch the faint glow of dawn spread out from the eastern horizon, gradually revealing and coloring an immense vista of undulating ridges and deserts receding into the haze of the infinite distance. Gazing out over the world taking shape out of the formless darkness of night, as if creation itself were taking place before our very eyes, I could imagine that in such a place, overwhelmed and stunned to silence by a view of incredible grandeur, even the most committed nonbeliever might hear, for one brief moment, the whisper of a still, small voice.

MOUNT ZION

Although Christians have lavished devotion on the physical site of Mount Sinai, the sacred mountain that has occupied the attention of Jews as a place of pilgrimage and veneration throughout most of their history has been Mount Zion. Originally the "stronghold of Zion," a fortified Jebusite town on a ridge that King David captured and made into his capital, it became identified in the Bible with Jerusalem, the sacred center of Israel and the Jewish religion. Three of the most common biblical synonyms for the city are Mount Zion, the Holy Mountain, and the Mountain of the Lord. The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, has 152 references to Jerusalem as Zion or Mount Zion. Biblical authors and commentators viewed the holy city of Judaism preeminently as the sacred mountain of God, the high place where he had chosen to have his temple and dwell among the Children of Israel. Although many Jews interpret Jerusalem as meaning the City of Shalom, or Peace, scholars have shown that the name probably refers to the place founded by Salem, a Canaanite deity of the setting sun, reinforcing Jerusalem's connection with the older Jebusite city on the original Mount Zion.[37]

The hard and polished quality of their ancient limestone makes the rounded hills of Jerusalem shimmer with light as though some higher, more luminous reality were shining through them. Standing beneath the brilliant sky, gazing over the sacred city, one can easily see why rabbinical writers regarded Mount Zion as the earthly reflection of a heavenly counterpart suffused with the glory of God enthroned on high. One can also understand how biblical prophets and psalmists could make of a low and unimpressive hill the greatest mountain on earth, overshadowing all others in the majesty of its spiritual height and grandeur.

Although they stress its awesome nature as the holy mountain of God, the more poetic passages of the Bible also dwell on the beauties of Zion. The forty-eighth

Psalm, which Jews traditionally recite every Monday morning, begins with the words:

> Great is the Lord and highly to be praised,
> In the city of our God, His holy mountain,
> Fair in situation, the joy of the whole earth;
> Even Mount Zion, the uttermost parts of the north,
> The city of the great King.[38]

The fiftieth Psalm makes the mountain a sublime source of divine power and glory:

> Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
> God has shone forth.
> Our God comes, and does not keep silence;
> A fire devours before Him,
> And round about him it storms mightily.[39]

The Psalms have enveloped Zion in the image of fire and storm associated with Sinai, but they have added to it an atmosphere of softness and beauty totally lacking in biblical descriptions of the earlier mountain, which appears only as a harsh and terrifying peak of awesome power and revelation.

In keeping with its softer and friendlier appearance, Zion is a humanized mountain, like Tai Shan, the imperial peak of China. Where no one but Moses could climb to the summit of Sinai and live, his descendants found an entire city already established on the crest of Zion, which they took and made the capital of their nation. Today, not only shrines and temples – as in the case of Tai Shan – but houses, streets, and markets cover the hills of the sacred mountain, which reverberates with the sounds of human activity. It is, in fact, one of the more densely populated places in the world. In addition, just as Tai Shan was the sacred peak of the Chinese emperors, the place where they offered sacrifices to heaven, so Zion was the holy mountain of the kings of Israel, the site of the temple where they made burnt offerings to God.

Jerusalem is, in fact, the conflation of two sacred mountains. According to the Bible, King Solomon constructed the original temple within the city on the traditional site of Mount Moriah, the place where Abraham bound Isaac and almost offered him as a sacrifice to God. Solomon brought up to the summit of this mountain, known today as the Temple Mount, the most sacred part of Mount Zion, the tabernacle with the ark containing the stone tablets Moses had received on Mount Sinai. In this way, the spiritual essence of Sinai was transferred to its resting place on Mount Zion. In going up to the Temple Mount, pilgrims could go up to the presence of God as Moses had on Mount Sinai. And indeed, a number of Psalms sung on pilgrimages to Jerusalem bear the title "A Song of Ascents." Today, the first place that most Jews visit on

coming to the holy city is the Western or Wailing Wall, the remnant of the Second Temple destroyed in 70 CE. There the observants, wrapped in prayer shawls, stand before the wall of ancient stones, rocking back and forth, lamenting the past and praying for the future. The golden dome of the Mosque of Omar, a striking symbol of modern-day Jerusalem, stands over the rock on the summit of the Temple Mount. In Jewish tradition this rock is not only the place of the primordial sacrifice: it is also the Foundation Stone, the point from which all of creation began.[40]

In the famous prophecy of Isaiah, one of the most influential and often quoted passages in the Bible, Mount Zion plays a prominent role as the divine center from which a new age will emerge, a golden age of peace and righteousness in which all will acknowledge the supremacy of God:

> And it shall come to pass in the last days,
> That the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains,
> And shall be exalted above the hills;
> And all nations shall flow unto it.
> And many peoples shall go and say:
> 'Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
> To the house of the God of Jacob;
> And He will teach us of His ways,
> And we will walk in His paths.'
> For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
> And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
> And He shall judge between the nations,
> And shall decide for many peoples;
> And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> And their spears into pruning-hooks;
> Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> Neither shall they learn war anymore.[41]

In the future Zion will replace Mount Sinai as the mountain of the law and the place of the final covenant between humankind and God.

The prophecy of Isaiah portends the central role that Zion and Jerusalem play in the messianic hopes and expectations of Christianity. As the site where the Messiah will appear, it becomes of necessity the place where Jesus must fulfill his destiny as the savior of mankind. There, on the summit of the sacred mountain of God, his life and teachings reach their dramatic climax in his crucifixion and resurrection. Pilgrims from all over the world come to take up his burden and follow the Via Dolorosa as it proceeds through the stations of the cross, winding up through the narrow streets of Jerusalem to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Jesus was laid to rest and rose from the dead to proclaim the salvation of the world. For the authors of the New Testament and

later theologians of the Christian tradition, Mount Zion represented the New Jerusalem, where the kingdom of God was, and will be, made manifest on earth. It also came to symbolize the Church, the spiritual home of all Christians

As the site of the Noble Sanctuary, the Muslim term for the Temple Mount, Jerusalem ranks as the third most important pilgrimage place in the Islamic world after Mecca and Medina. The Mosque of Omar, also known as the Dome of the Rock, stands over the rock that marks the summit of Mount Moriah, the natural altar where Abraham offered to sacrifice his son and the place where Muhammad took off on his night journey to heaven, although some sources say the Prophet flew up from the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque. According to Muslim tradition, on the Day of Judgement, an angel will appear on this rock to sound the trumpet announcing the end of the world, bookending the Jewish tradition that creation began on the very same stone. Set on an octagonal structure of blue and white marble inlaid with the graceful characters of Arabic script, the gold dome of the mosque gleams in the sun, providing a center to orient the eye as one gazes from a distance on the sacred city and mountain of Jerusalem. Within its cool and softly lit interior, a marble balustrade surrounds the worn and wrinkled slab of ancient rock that bears witness to the hopes and sorrows of so many people from so many faiths.

Figure 9 The Muslim Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount with the Jewish Cemetery and the Christian Mount of Olives in the background, representing the three religions for which Jerusalem is sacred. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

The overwhelming importance that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have placed on Jerusalem and Mount Zion has produced a long history of bloody conflict over possession of the sacred mountain. Jewish rebellion against Roman rule led to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE – the Babylonians had destroyed the First Temple in 586 BCE. After Constantine the Great converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE, Christians gained control of Jerusalem and built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the seventh century Persian and Arab forces of the new religion of Islam wrested the city from the Byzantine Empire and constructed the Dome of the Rock over the site of the Jewish temple in 691. In a holy war against the Muslims, the Crusaders took the sacred mountain of Christianity in 1099 and established the Kingdom of Jerusalem on its heights. The forces of Islam recaptured the city in 1187, and the Ottoman Turks, who took over in 1517, retained Muslim control until 1917, when Palestine fell under the rule of the British Empire. In 1948, following the deaths of more than six million Jews in the Holocaust, the Zionist Movement, started in the nineteenth century and named for Mount Zion, succeeded in re-establishing a Jewish homeland with its capital in Jerusalem – a capital that most other nations refused to recognize. The city itself remained divided between Israeli and Arab possession until 1967 when Israel took the eastern half from Jordan in the Six Day War.

Religious conflicts over the sacred mountain have continued under Israeli control. Many Jews and Christians believe that the Messiah or Jesus can only come once the Jewish temple is rebuilt on the Temple Mount. In order to make way for the reconstruction and hasten that day some zealots have sought to destroy the two mosques occupying the site, provoking intense reactions in the Muslim world. In 1969 an Australian belonging to an evangelical Christian sect set fire to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Outraged by this desecration of one of their most sacred shrines, Arab leaders throughout the Middle East called for holy war against Israel, and the King of Saudi Arabia organized a summit of Islamic countries to address the crisis. When I met with Ibrahim Dabbek, the Palestinian architect who worked on repairing the damage to the mosque, he described how the fire had destroyed part of the roof and an 800-year old wooden pulpit inlaid with ivory. Spreading like wildfire, rumors of suspected attacks on the Noble Sanctuary, along with an Israeli police raid on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 2021, have continued to spark tension and unrest in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Conflicting religious claims to the sacred city and mountain lie at the heart of the most difficult issues to be resolved on the way to establishing a lasting peace in the Middle East. The Director of Muslim Courts in Israel told me in 1993 that he thought negotiators would get to Jerusalem last. "What if they resolved Jerusalem first?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "Then the other matters would fall into place."[42]

Sinai and Zion, the two mountains of God in the Bible, represent the opposite but complementary poles that define the full range and diversity of the Jewish tradition. Sinai is the awesome peak of the covenant and the law, the place of the prophet and his revelation. Zion, on the other hand, is the beautiful site of the temple, the place of the priest and his sacrifice. The conflict between prophets and priests, righteousness and ritual, runs through the later books of the Old Testament and helped to give rise to Christianity and its subsequent schisms. Unlike Sinai, which has no political associations, Zion became the capital city and mountain of kings, beginning with David and Solomon. In the second Psalm God declares, "Truly it is I that have established my king upon Zion, my holy mountain." The tradition of sacral kingship associated with Mount Zion radically altered the nature of Judaism and prepared the way for the messianic thought and prophecy of Isaiah. At the same time, it placed a heavy responsibility on the kings of Israel to uphold the commandments of Moses and be true to the legacy of Sinai.

Mount Sinai lay in a remote desert, far from the world of everyday life. The events that took place on its summit were veiled in fire and cloud, hidden from the sight of all but Moses, the greatest of prophets. Zion, on the other hand, rises in the middle of a city. The sacrifices performed in the temple on its heights were open and visible to all. In the history of Judaism, Sinai, the rugged peak of the wilderness, gives way to Zion, the cultivated mountain of civilization. Although the values they represent may appear to be in conflict, the message of each comes from the same source and reveals the presence of the same God, the God who demands justice and righteousness of his people. The voice that sounded in the open space of the desert now echoes in the narrow streets of the city. Zion incorporates and fulfills in human society the meaning of the lonely encounter on Sinai.

Sinai is the mountain of the beginning, Zion the mountain of the end. With the covenant on Sinai, Judaism as we know it takes form: a holy nation, a nation of priests, is born. A people of wandering desert origin, a disparate band of liberated slaves, comes together to forge a new tradition based on the laws received by Moses on the heights of the sacred peak. In the future, in the last of days, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, the covenant made on Sinai will reach its fruition on Zion, when all the nations of the world will come up to Jerusalem to receive and accept the word of God. There, on the heights of the holy mountain, exalted above all other mountains, the Jewish tradition will witness the end for which it began: the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, a golden age of peace and righteousness in which "the lion shall lie down with the lamb" and "nation shall not lift up sword against nation." Together Sinai and Zion span the history, past and future, of Judaism itself.[43]

The tension symbolized in the opposition between the two mountains led the disciples of Jesus to break with their own tradition and form the new

religion of Christianity. Like the prophets who inveighed against the immorality of priests and kings, Jesus rebuked the religious establishment for its hypocrisy, exemplified in the practice of allowing moneychangers to ply their trade in the temple of Zion. His followers saw his life and teaching as the sign of a new dispensation, made by God to replace and fulfill the old law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. As the mountain of the future, Zion became for early Christians a symbol of the messianic kingdom of God proclaimed in the prophecy of Isaiah and confirmed in the person of Jesus, a divine descendant of the House of David.

Although the salvation of Zion seemed to have replaced the law of Sinai, the tension between the two remained alive, producing the schisms that eventually splintered the Christian Church. In the eleventh century the Eastern Orthodox branch based in Constantinople split with the Latin Church of Rome, rejecting the authority of the Pope as the high priest of Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox took a particular interest in the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai, which they saw as a prefiguring of the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, made the temple of Jerusalem on Mount Zion a model for the Vatican in Rome. When Martin Luther started the Protestant Movement in the sixteenth century as a protest against the priestly excesses of Rome, he turned to the Old Testament and revived Western interest in the revelations of prophets such as Moses. Like Jews who based their fundamental beliefs and practices on the Torah received on Mount Sinai, Protestants put primary emphasis on scripture as the word of God.

The conflict over religious authority that Sinai and Zion symbolize also produced schisms in Islam. Shortly after Muhammad's death in 632 CE, a dispute over his successor split the new religion into the two sects that divide the Islamic world today. The Sunnis, the larger sect, decided to follow the Caliphs, a line of leaders elected from the Prophet's tribe. The Shiites, however, insisted that the leadership of Islam should pass through direct descendants of Ali, the cousin of Muhammad and husband of his daughter Fatimah. Unlike the Sunnis, they held that their first twelve leaders, called Imams, were, like the Pope, infallible and guided by God. Shiites believe that the last Imam is the Mahdi, the Muslim version of the Messiah. In this belief they express a messianic ideal associated in Judaism and Christianity with visions of Mount Zion.

The tensions revealed through the symbolism of Sinai and Zion run through religions and cultures around the world, both traditional and secular. In modern democracies they express themselves most pointedly in the dilemma of balancing the rights of the individual with the good of society. Although such tensions produce conflict and division, they also provide the impetus for growth and renewal. Out of the interaction of priest and prophet, tradition and revelation, city and wilderness, individual and society, come the changes and

innovations required to realize the highest aspirations of the heart and mind. The tensions symbolized in the opposition between the two mountains force us to lift our gaze and seek something higher from which the good of each may come. In the reconciliation of Sinai with Zion lies a vision of the future with the power to inspire us in our efforts to resolve the conflicts that rack the world today.

In the end the sacred mountains of the Middle East hold out the promise of paradise on earth. Their shining heights draw the eye up to the heavens and a vision of the golden age to come. For the prophets and poets of the Bible, Sinai becomes Zion, which becomes, in turn, the entire world, transformed and revealed in its true nature as the dwelling place of God. Gazing up to the sacred summit of Zion, bright beneath the sunlit sky, the Psalmist prays:

> O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;
> Let them bring me to your holy mountain, and to your dwelling-places.[44]

SEVEN

EUROPE

Paradigms of Perfection

From the bright peaks of the Mediterranean to the dark fjords of the Arctic, mountain ranges weave intricate patterns across the landscape of Europe, supplying the texture and definition responsible for much of the continent's beauty and appeal. Cliffs and ridges of clean rock dropping into the Aegean provide spectacular settings for the temples and monasteries that grace the mountains of Greece. North of the Mediterranean the snow peaks of the Alps swirl around in a great arc to divide the cloudy reaches of northern Europe from the sunlit regions of the south. The spirits of legendary figures of the past still stalk the crags and moors that cover the hills of the British Isles. Ghost-like memories of Norse gods haunt the mountains and fjords of Scandinavia, adding to the atmosphere of mystery that hovers like mist over the lonely fjords and mountains of the Arctic north.

Much of our modern-day appreciation of mountains derives from images of those in Europe, such as Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, which provide us with a standard of mountain beauty and perfection. For all their appeal and grace, however, none of these mountains stand out as sacred peaks comparable in religious stature to Zion in the Middle East or Kailas in Asia. Mount Olympos, the only European mountain to rival Zion or Kailas in the popular imagination, long ago lost the kind of living power and reality they still possess for the millions who revere them. Yet, even though Greeks no longer venerate its lofty summit as the home of the ancient gods, Olympos does provide the

basic model for Western conceptions of mountains as abodes of deities in traditional cultures elsewhere in the world.

GREECE

Ranges of folded limestone with valleys opening toward the sea characterize the classic landscape of Greece. From Athos and Olympos in the north to Parnassos and Ida in the center and the south, views of ridges and peaks blend with vistas of the blue Aegean to create the boundaries of a well-ordered world. A sparseness of vegetation combines with a brightness of light to give the Greek mountains a sharpness and clarity of definition that leave a powerful impression on the mind of the beholder. Neither too high to be forbidding nor too low to be ignored, they possess a beauty and harmony of proportion that invite visitors to enter them as they would a temple like the Parthenon in Athens. Sensitive to these effects, the ancient Greeks placed many of their temples on high places oriented toward views of distant mountains.

The earliest civilization in the region of Greece, the Minoan, flourished on the mountainous island of Crete between 3000 and 1500 BCE. The religion of this archaic culture centered around the cult of a female deity worshipped on mountains. The peaks sacred to this deity, a mother goddess associated with the fertility of the earth, tended to have the rounded shape of breasts or the cleft form of the female sex organ. The Cretan palaces of Knossos and Phaistos were built facing two of her most important mountains: Mount Juktas and Mount Ida, both crowned with double summits shaped like protuberances around a vaginal opening.[1]

Starting around 2000 BCE successive waves of invaders from the north gradually took over the Greek mainland. Out of the interaction of their culture with that of the Minoan came the classical civilization of ancient Greece. The religion the invaders brought with them from the steppes of Eurasia was dominated by masculine deities ruled by a god of thunder and lightning. When these war-like deities took over Greece around the end of the second millennium BCE, the Minoan goddess became Rhea, the mother of Zeus, king of the gods and ruler of Olympos. Fleeing her husband Kronos (Cronus), who was eating their offspring to forestall a prophecy that one of her children would supplant him, Rhea went to Crete, where she gave birth to Zeus in the secrecy of a cave on Mount Dikti. Gaea, the Greek deity of the earth and another transformation of the mother goddess of Minoan civilization, carried the baby to nearby Mount Ida for safekeeping. There, in the care of nymphs and warriors, he grew up, playing on the sacred mountain of Crete. When he reached manhood – or in this case adult godhood – Zeus returned to overthrow his father and become king of the gods.

Like the ancient mother goddess of Crete, many of the Olympians, the twelve great deities of classical mythology, were closely associated with mountains. As the god of rain and thunder, the ruler of the sky whose place belonged in the clouds, Zeus was worshipped on numerous peaks, from Olympos in the north to Ida in the south. One of his sanctuaries, a mound of earth on the summit of Mount Lykaion in Arcadia, was said to have been the scene of human sacrifice. Artemis, goddess of forests and the hunt, loved to roam the hills and valleys of Arcadia in the company of nymphs. One of her epithets was Lady of the Wild Mountains. Apollo, the youthful god of light and reason, had his sanctuary at Delphi on the slopes of Mount Parnassos, where the Muses dwelled.

Hephaistos, the gnarled god of fire and forge, was born on the summit of Mount Olympos. Ashamed of his lame and twisted appearance, his mother Hera, the wife of Zeus, cast him off the mountain into the sea. Hephaistos eventually moved to Sicily, where he took up residence inside Mount Etna, the highest volcano in Europe. There he placed his heavy anvil on the head of Typhon, a monster whom Zeus had crushed and imprisoned within the fiery mountain. The smoke and steam issuing from the crater of Etna indicated to Greek sailors on passing ships that Hephaistos was hard at work, giving Typhon a truly monstrous headache. The Romans later assimilated Hephaistos to their own divine blacksmith and god of fire, Vulcan, from whose name has come the English word *volcano*.

Mount Olympos

Originally the dwelling place of Zeus, the lofty peak on which the god of storms gathered his clouds and hurled his thunderbolts, Mount Olympos became the principal abode of the twelve Olympians, the highest deities of the Greek pantheon. There on its summit, suspended above the world of mortals in a cloudless realm of bliss, Zeus ruled over the affairs of humans and gods with his brothers, Poseidon and Hades; his sister, Hestia; his wife, Hera; and his children, Ares, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite, Hermes, Artemis, and Hephaistos. Lines from the *Iliad*, stating that Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades – the deities of sky, sea, and underworld – had Mount Olympos in common suggest that for the ancient Greeks the mountain transcended any simple conceptions of a heaven on high, removed from the cares of the world below. Indeed, elsewhere in the epic Zeus boasts that he could pull up the earth and sea on a golden rope and hang them from a pinnacle of the sacred peak.[2]

In addition to being the divine abode of the gods, Olympos served as their impregnable fortress. After Zeus wrested sovereignty from his father, Kronos, the Titans rose against his rule and attacked him on his sacred mountain. Entrenched on the heights of Olympos, Zeus hurled thunderbolts down at

his attackers, scorching the earth and boiling the sea before defeating the Titans and casting them into the underworld. No sooner had he done so than the Giants, even more formidable foes, emerged from the ground and tried to storm the sacred peak by piling the nearby mountains of Ossa and Pelion on top of each other. Since an oracle had proclaimed that only a mortal could kill these sons of the goddess of the earth, Zeus and the Olympians had to call on Heracles (Hercules) to protect their mountain fortress by finishing off their enemies for them.

Although much of Greek mythology takes place in the shadow of Mount Olympos, we find surprisingly little description of the mountain itself in classical literature. Numerous passages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* refer in passing to the peak as the setting for the comings and goings of the gods, the exalted place where the immortals on high meet to decide the fate of heroes on earth. References to Zeus, for example, generally portray him on the summit of Olympos. But neither the epics nor other works of Greek literature describe the mountain in detail. Instead, they give us only brief glimpses from which to form our own picture of the peak.

Here, for example, is one of the more detailed descriptions of Mount Olympos in the *Iliad*, a passage describing the ascent of Thetis, the divine mother of the hero Achilles, to make an appeal to Zeus on the summit of the sacred mountain:

> . . . nor did Thetis forget the entreaties
> of her son, but she emerged from the sea's waves early
> in the morning and went up to the tall sky and Olympos.
> She found Cronus' broad-browed son apart from the others
> sitting upon the highest peak of rugged Olympos.[3]

A few words are enough to convey the vivid impression of a peak of great height and ruggedness. We see Zeus perched like an eagle on its topmost crag at the very top of the sky, overlooking the ocean far below. The poet Hesiod in his *Theogony*, a major source of Greek mythology, reinforces the impression of height by making repeated references to "snowy Olympos" and "the highest snow summit of Olympos."[4]

The *Iliad* also presents an image of a broad massif of many peaks and ridges. It tells us how the goddess Iris made her way to "the utmost gates of many-folded Olympos." The phrase "many-folded Olympos," which appears elsewhere in Homer and Hesiod, gives us a poetic image of a mountain, or mountain range, creased with ridges and ravines resembling the folds in a curtain hung from the heights of the sky. The "utmost gates" mentioned in the passage refers to the clouds and darkness that enshroud Olympos and bar the way to the realm of the gods on the summit. These clouds and darkness form two great doors that the Horae, goddesses of time

entrusted with guarding the sacred mountain, open and close for the immortals as they come and go.[5]

The epics give us a more detailed description of the abode of the gods on Olympos' summit. There, above the gate of clouds, in a realm of light and bliss, the Olympian deities dwell in perfect comfort, untouched by wind and weather. The Odyssey describes the rarefied atmosphere of their abode in heavenly terms:

> Never a tremor of wind, or a splash of rain,
> no errant snowflake comes to stain that heaven,
> so calm, so vaporless, the world of light.
> Here, where the gay gods live their days of pleasure.[6]

Seated on golden thrones beside golden tables, the gods pass their time feasting on ambrosia and nectar and savoring the fragrance of burnt offerings sent up from altars in the world below. The Muses and Graces entertain them with beautiful songs and dances, accompanied by the sweet music of Apollo's lyre. From time to time, Zeus calls them to assemblies to resolve disputes and intervene in the affairs of mortals on earth.

Like Mount Kailas in Indian mythology, Olympos seems originally to have been an idealized mountain only later projected onto an actual feature of the natural landscape. The epics give us very little specific information to determine its geographical location. As a result, a number of mountains associated with Zeus, from Greece to Turkey and Cyprus, bear the name of Olympos, a word meaning "mountain" in the pre-Greek languages of the Mediterranean. Ancient tradition, however, settled on one as the most likely abode of the gods – Mount Olympos in Thessaly, 160 miles north of Athens, the highest and most impressive mountain in Greece. A passage in the Iliad relating how Hera leaves the dwelling of Zeus and immediately passes over Pieria, a landmark that lies near this particular mountain, reinforces its identification with the supreme peak of Greek mythology.[7]

Like a great wave poised over the coast, the mountain rises in one smooth sweep directly up from the sea to the heights of the sky, reaching an altitude of 9,573 feet. Its cloud-fringed silhouette, visible from far out in the Aegean, must have made a great impression on sea-faring Greeks, especially those on their way to the wars in Troy. It would not have taken much to see the gods coming and going in the golden beams of light radiating from its highest peak. Viewed from closer up, the solid bulk of the mountain, composed of weathered limestone resting on metamorphic rock, breaks up into a cluster of jagged summits separated by frightening precipices, grim and grey with streaks of polished snow. Clouds frequently gather about them, swirling through their pinnacles and cutting them off from the world below, making Olympos the perfect throne for Zeus, the awesome god of thunder and lightning.

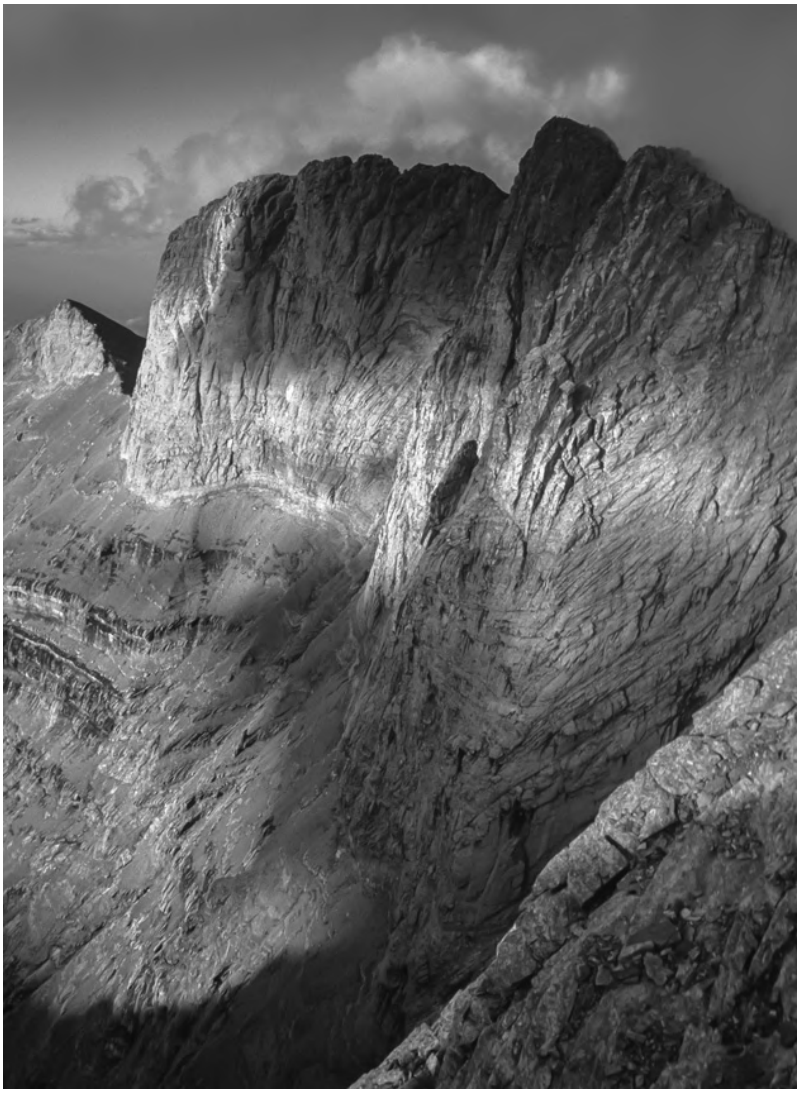


Figure 10 Summits of Mount Olympos – the Throne of Zeus on the left, Mytikas, the highest summit, on the right. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

At the foot of the mountain lies Dion, an ancient city and archaeological site sacred to the king of the gods. On the eve of his famous campaign against the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great came to Dion to conduct games and make sacrifices to Zeus on Mount Olympos for the success of his venture. The ceremonies lasted nine days in honor of the nine Muses, following which he went on to defeat the Persian emperor Darius and go all the way to India, leaving behind the legend of his life and conquests. Blocks of marble partly covered by grass mark the altar where Alexander offered up bulls in sacrifice to Zeus on his sacred mountain.

When I visited Dion in 2002, the chief archaeologist, Dimitrios Pandermalis, told me that very little or no archaeological research had been done on the highest peak of Olympos, which requires rock climbing to reach the summit. Intrigued by his remarks, I returned later that year on an assignment from the

National Geographic Expeditions Council to climb the mountain and explore the connections between sacred mountains in Greece and ancient mythology and archaeology. My colleague on the research trip, Johan Reinhard, was specialized in high-altitude archaeology and had done excavations and discovered Inca mummies as high as 22,000 feet in the Andes. We climbed Mytikas, the highest peak of Olympos, and found nothing there, but on Skolio, the second highest peak of the mountain, only sixteen feet lower and a much easier climb, we photographed ceramic shards lying on a dirt platform just below the summit. Experts who looked at the photographs tentatively identified them as roof tiles dating back to the fifth century, making the place where we found them possibly the highest archaeological site in Greece.

A few steps took us to the top of Skala, where a local legend holds that a marble palace or temple once stood. A Greek mountaineer, Kostas Zolotas, told us that the first known people to climb the much harder peak of Mytikas in 1913 had found a marble hand near the summit of Skolio. Zolotas had suggested to the chief archaeologist at Dion that he send students to search the foot of the precipitous north face of Skolio for other artifacts thrown off the top by religious fundamentalists intent on destroying pagan idols. But this had not been done. When Johan and I peered over the edge, we could see why. The face fell sheer for more than 1,000 feet, and it would be difficult to reach its base, covered with loose rubble, even coming up from below. Moreover, the lives of anyone attempting to do research there would be imperiled by rocks crashing down from above.

Archaeologists had, however, discovered remnants of an ancient Greek sanctuary dedicated to Zeus on Aghios Antonios, the fifth highest peak of Olympos and another easy climb. A number of artifacts had been recovered and taken down to Dion, but we found just below the summit two marble pedestals left behind. They had probably supported sculptures of Hercules and other figures of ancient Greek religion important to Alexander and the Macedonians. Ice filled a foot-shaped indentation where one of these statues had once stood. Coins found at the site indicated that religious use of the sanctuary dated back to the Hellenistic period.[8]

Over succeeding centuries people continued to ascend the heights of Olympos to conduct religious rituals and practices. In the sixteenth century, Saint Dionysios of Olympos built a shrine on the ruins of an ancient altar on top of Profitis Ilias, the sixth highest summit of the mountain and named for the biblical prophet Elijah. Inside the small chapel, crudely constructed out of rough slabs of rock, we found a painting of Elijah meditating in a cave on a rocky mountain. As the prophet who called down fire from the sky to defeat the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, he was the logical successor to Zeus, the ancient god hurling down thunderbolts from his throne high on Mount Olympos. Every year on July 20, the feast day of Elijah, monks from as far

away as Mount Athos would file up in a religious procession to the windswept shrine, the highest Orthodox chapel in Greece and the Balkans – and perhaps the entire Orthodox world.

Although no longer revered as the abode of the gods of ancient Greek religion, Mount Olympos continues to have great importance in the modern world as a powerful symbol of classical heritage. Beginning in 1985 developers proposed building a ski resort and Homeric theme park on the mountain complete with garish replicas of ancient temples and imitation statues of the twelve Olympian deities as principal attractions. An additional proposal to construct a cable car to the top of the highest peak sparked a campaign of protest that in 1989 prompted over 250 mountaineers, journalists, and environmentalists from all over Europe to climb Mount Olympos and hold a demonstration on the summit. Letters of protest from the Greek movie star Melina Mercouri and the president of the European Parliament along with a petition signed by 100 well-known authors and Nobel Laureates including Günter Grass and Umberto Eco forced the Greek Ministries of Culture and Environment to cancel the development plans. In 1996 I attended a congress at Trikala in Greece convened to make the cancellation permanent and discourage any further attempts to desecrate the sacred mountain.[9]

My earlier ascent of Olympos in 1973 involved a couple of incidents that seemed to come out of Greek mythology. In the course of a journey up the coast of Greece, I met a blind Englishman who wanted to climb Mount Olympos. He was traveling alone, sightseeing, which the Greeks found quite puzzling. "How can you sightsee if you can't see?" they would ask him. He would respond that he liked to touch and feel the stones of ancient ruins. Since I was planning to climb Mount Olympos, he asked if I would take him up the mountain. Having no rope, I was hesitant to do so until we ran into a couple of Swiss climbers with the necessary equipment. They agreed to accompany us, and we set off to climb Mount Olympos together.

The last part of the ascent involved a scramble up easy cliffs. With one of us ahead and the others behind the blind man, we guided his hands and feet from hold to hold. Secured by the rope, he moved with confidence, delighting in the cold touch of rock and wind. As we approached the summit, I thought of Teiresias, the blind seer of Greek drama and myth. Did our companion, like the ancient sage, see more in darkness than we in light? Was he closer to a blinding vision of the gods on their sacred peak? We reached the top without incident, and never have I seen anyone experience greater joy on the summit of a mountain than he that morning, standing there blind in a blaze of sun and sky.

After helping him come down, I left the Englishman with the Swiss and went off on my own to climb a slightly lower but more spectacular peak of Olympos, nicknamed the Throne of Zeus. By this time clouds had gathered

around the mountain, and as I picked my way up a narrowing ridge of rock, I entered a blurred and shifting world of mist. Great precipices opened to either side, falling away into formless space. Not far from the summit I came to a tricky spot – a bulging tower that overhung drops of 1,000 feet on one side, 500 on the other. I started to wriggle past it, but without the reassuring presence of a rope or companion my legs began to tremble and I had to withdraw. I sat down, considering what to do next – whether to try again or turn around and go back. At that very moment a flight of black birds came sweeping out of the mist to pass right over me and vanish into the grey void surrounding the Throne of Zeus.

A bird omen, telling me what to do. In the *Iliad* Zeus takes the form of a black eagle and flies down from Olympos to communicate with mortals. I remembered that for the ancient Greeks the sight of birds flying from one direction was a good sign, from the other a bad sign. The only trouble was that I could not remember which was which. After pondering this problem for a number of minutes, I stood up, said to myself, "What the hell," and made my move. The birds must have been flying the right way for I easily crossed the difficult passage and reached the summit, there to commune with the spirit of Zeus in the clouds. Some years later, I asked a friend of mine, a professor of classics at Harvard University, about bird omens, but he could not remember which direction was which either, and we concluded that I must have been lucky – or favored by the gods.

Mount Parnassos

South of Olympos, less than eighty miles from Athens, rises the other famous mountain of ancient Greece, Mount Parnassos, sacred to Apollo and the Muses. A long massif capped by a smooth, burnished ridge with two summits – the highest 8,054 feet high – it stands serene above the Gulf of Corinth, overlooking the northern Peloponessos (Peloponnese). The sight of its broad outline spread across the gleaming sky has inspired poets throughout the ages, making it a favored abode of the goddesses of poetic inspiration. The ancient Greeks also revered the numerous groves, ravines, and caves along its flanks as the haunts of gods and spirits who influenced the events of their daily lives. Women used to go up from Delphi in torch-lit processions through the cliffs to the Korykian Cave, sacred to Pan and the Nymphs. There they would play the role of the Nymphs in orgiastic rites that may have had their origin in fertility rituals dedicated to older earth deities. Artifacts found in the cave indicate that its usage went back to the Neolithic period, well before recorded history. The sanctuary of Delphi on the lower slopes of Parnassos below the Korykian Cave was the seat of the most celebrated oracle in all of Greece, a priestess on whose cryptic words in trance depended decisions affecting affairs of state.

Greek mythology tells us that Apollo established Delphi as one of his principal places of worship. Shortly after his birth he pursued the dragon Python to her lair in a gorge on the side of Parnassos. There, in the sacred grove of Pytho, he killed her and built an altar to mark the spot. In search of attendants for the sanctuary he wished to establish, he took the form of a dolphin and leapt out of the sea to commandeer a passing ship. The sailors and their descendants he made the priests of his temple at Pytho. Since they had first seen him in the shape of a dolphin, he told them to call him "Delphinian," from which came the name of the sanctuary itself – Delphi.

Through his oracle, a priestess named the Pythia, Apollo would make pronouncements concerning the destiny of men and women. According to legendary accounts, she would take her seat on a golden tripod set up over a fissure in his sanctuary at Delphi. Partly intoxicated by fumes issuing from the depths of the earth, the oracle would fall into a trance and become possessed by the god. Attendant priests would then interpret the cryptic prophecies that would stream from her mouth. When the Persian emperor Xerxes attacked Athens in 480 BCE, the people of the city sent emissaries to Delphi to ask the current oracle for her advice on what to do. In her enigmatic manner she advised them to seek refuge in wooden walls. Themistocles, the leader of the Athenians, took her words to mean that they should leave the city and take to the sea in wooden ships. The victory of the Greeks in the famous naval battle of Salamis, which resulted from his interpretation of the oracle's prophecy, changed the course of history – and determined the subsequent character of Western civilization. After this disastrous defeat, the Persians, who might have otherwise imposed their culture on Greece, never returned to the shores of Europe.[10]

The Muses, goddesses of song who accompanied Apollo, also frequented Parnassos and served as guardians of his oracle, reflecting the close connection between poetry and prophecy in ancient Greece. The spring of Castalia, which was sacred to the Muses, issued from a cleft in the cliffs above Delphi. Its clear and shining waters inspired poetry in poets and prophecy in the priestesses of Apollo. The Greeks also used the sacred spring in purification rites intended to make supplicants fit to receive the words of the god at Delphi. The ancients regarded a carved rock at the place of prophecy as the *omphalos*, the navel and center of the earth. Today only the ruins of the sanctuary remain, strewn like bones of marble upon the ground. Yet something of the life and spirit of the place endures – in the wild call of eagles circling over the cliffs of Parnassos, in the deep and fluid light of the setting sun, in the silence of the stars shining through the gorge that once marked the spiritual center of the ancient world.

My ascent of Parnassos with Reinhard in a grey rainstorm that left us dripping on the summit called to mind a Greek myth about the mountain

that bears a remarkable similarity to the biblical story of Noah and Mount Ararat. Outraged at the theft of fire by Prometheus, who had given it to humanity, Zeus decided to wipe out the human race by flooding the earth. Prometheus warned his mortal son, Deucalion, about the impending disaster, and told him to build an ark for himself and his wife. Zeus caused rain to pour from the sky for nine days, inundating the world. On the tenth day the torrent abated, and the ark came to rest on the summit of Mount Parnassos. Deucalion and his wife disembarked and offered a sacrifice to Zeus to protect themselves from his wrath. Pleased by their pious action, the king of the gods offered to grant them a wish. They asked him to restore the human race. In another version of the myth, they descended to Delphi on the lower slopes of Parnassos and made the same request of Themis, an early wife of Zeus, who told them to throw the bones of their first ancestor behind them. Realizing that she was referring to the rocks that formed the skeleton of the earth from which their forefathers had sprung, they picked up some stones and tossed them over their shoulders. The stones turned into men and women who went down to repopulate the world, making Deucalion and Parnassos the Greek equivalents of Noah and Ararat.

Mount Athos

The floods of time have swept away the gods of ancient Greece. Converted to Christianity more than 1,500 years ago, most Greeks no longer regard Olympos and Parnassos as places of sacred power and inspiration. They look instead to Mount Athos, the holy mountain of the Eastern Orthodox Church. A mountainous sanctuary inhabited by monks and hermits, Athos forms the easternmost of three narrow peninsulas that reach out like the claws of a crab to rake the blue waters of the northern Aegean. A wooded ridge thirty miles long and two to five miles wide, it rises sheer from the sea to culminate near its tip in Mount Athos itself, a beautifully shaped peak of delicate white limestone and marble, poised 6,670 feet above the waves that crash and swirl around its base.

Both Mount Athos and the peninsula that bears its name abound with wild streams that water a rugged landscape of hanging forests and flowering meadows. Along the flanks of the peak itself, sharply defining its edges, bluish grey cliffs drop straight into the sea, forming a coastline so sheer and smooth that boats have difficulty finding a safe harbor to land. Frequent storms sweeping in from the Aegean make the peninsula even more remote and inaccessible, a perfect sanctuary for anchorites seeking a place of quiet contemplation far from the distracting influence of the outside world. Perched like white gulls on rocks, monasteries and hermitages dot the cliffs and crags of Mount Athos, overlooking vast blue views of sea and sky. There, suspended

between heaven and earth, monks and hermits live in the humbling awareness of their total dependence on the grace of God.

The modern Greek name for Athos, Aghion Oros, means the "Holy Mountain." Sometime after Christianity took over Greece in the fourth century, the peak and peninsula that had been sacred to ancient gods such as Zeus and Apollo became the special preserve of the Virgin Mary, who assumed the role of its divine patroness and guardian. According to Greek legend, she joined the apostles in their mission to spread the Gospels. She boarded a ship for Cyprus, but the vessel was blown off course. When the long ridge and marble peak of Mount Athos came into view, she said, "This mountain is holy ground. Let it now be my portion. Here let me remain."

The ship put into shore beside a temple dedicated to Apollo. When Mary set foot on land, the statues of the pagan gods shattered and fell to the ground. A great stone image of Apollo himself spoke out, declaring itself a false and empty idol. She thereupon baptized and converted the entire population of the peninsula to Christianity. A voice from heaven responded and declared Mount Athos to be her special place. In recognition of her role as patron saint of Athos, the peninsula is known today as the "Garden of the Mother of God."[11]

The history of Athos as a place of hermitage begins with Peter the Athonite, a monk who lived in the ninth century. One night, as he was sailing back from his ordination in Rome, Mary appeared to him in a dream to tell him that he would spend the rest of his life on her holy mountain. A few days later his ship passed by Athos and came to a stop, despite the presence of a strong wind. Peter took this as a sign that he should disembark and stay on the mountain. Climbing up the wild and uninhabited slopes of Athos, Peter came to a cave infested by demons and made it his hermitage. Satan and his host mounted a number of attacks on the hermit, but he fended them off, and after seven years of trials, he attained a state of complete humility and spiritual perfection. For fifty years he lived alone in the cave, surrounded by demons and wild beasts.[12]

Following his example, others came to dwell in hermitages on Mount Athos. By the end of the ninth century, many of them had gathered together in *lavras*, informal communities of hermits clustered around spiritual leaders, such as Saint Euthymios, the founder of the first *lavra*. Over time a number of these *lavras* crystallized into monasteries. Saint Athanasios founded the first and most famous monastery on Athos, the Great Lavra, in the middle of the tenth century with the financial assistance of the Emperor of Byzantium.

Over the centuries a number of Byzantine emperors lavished wealth and patronage on Mount Athos, along with titles and independence from outside control. In 1094 an emperor exempted its monasteries from taxes in the hope that "the most royal and divine Mountain should stand above other mountains of the universe, as Constantinople stands above other cities." As a result of such

imperial patronage, the great monasteries of Athos, like the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, became repositories of priceless works of Byzantine art and literature. They also assumed the form of fortresses designed to guard their treasures and protect their monks from the attacks of marauding pirates. Some even had overhanging walls and stone turrets equipped with cannon. During various periods of turmoil in the history of Athos, a number of these monastic fortresses were destroyed. Of the 300 or so monasteries that at one time adorned the slopes of the holy mountain, twenty established during the late Byzantine Empire still survive, including the Great Lavra itself.[13]

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Athos reached its peak with over 7,000 monks, many of them Russian Orthodox. In more recent years the number has fallen to about 2,000 monks, most of them now Greek. The three forms of monasticism that developed over the ages still coexist side by side. Monks continue to live in solitary hermitages, often perched in inaccessible eyries; in *lavras* consisting of loose collections of individual cells; and in the large established monasteries, such as the Great Lavra. Their daily life includes physical labor as well as spiritual contemplation. Gardening forms an important part of their religious practice, anchoring them to the more concrete realities of existence. The following passage written by a monk reveals the spiritual delight and satisfaction he and his fellows derive from working with the soil of the holy mountain:

> And I had a small axe and I cleared pine-trees, olive, holm-oaks, and I chopped them up. And sometimes I planted olives, sometimes pears, or apples, or almond-trees, or vegetables, leeks and garlic, and I rejoiced in the soil as the worldly man in money. I found myself in a garden of graces, in a true paradise of delight. . . The place was full of fragrance, the trees gave out their odors, birds flew around about, singing while one chanted, and the ground was covered with various flowers and lilies, delighting the eye and ear and filling one with gladness. . . Hearing, sight, touch, smell, all offered thanks to God.[14]

Such work serves the higher purpose of life on Mount Athos – to resolve the conflict between the worlds of matter and spirit and to recover the spiritual vision and state of humankind before the Fall. The path of contemplation leading to this goal ascends through three stages in which the mind gradually turns from the sensual pleasures of the body to the intelligible delights of the soul. In the first stage the monk purifies himself through the practice of austerities and cultivates virtue through the recitation of prayers. The sense of space embodied in the blue immensities of sea and sky around him infuses his contemplation, preparing him for the second stage in which he comes to perceive and know the glorious mysteries of God. In the third and final stage, he goes beyond knowledge to attain union with divinity itself. Having

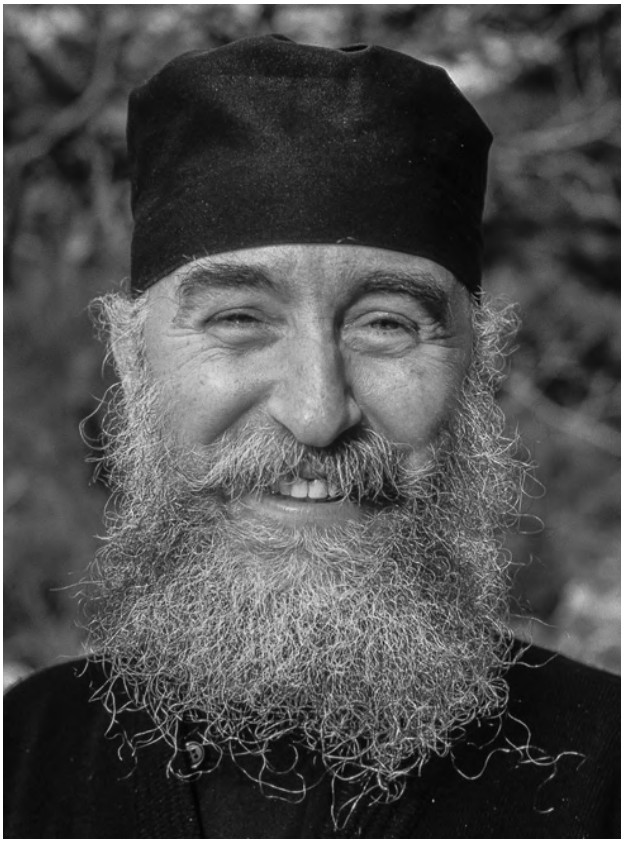


Figure 11 A smiling monk on Mount Athos. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

recovered the state of perfection that Adam possessed before the fall, he assumes the divine nature of light, the pure and perfect light that glows in the air and glitters on the waves around Mount Athos. He becomes, in the words of Saint Symeon,

> . . . one who is pure and free of the world
> and converses continually with God alone;
> He sees Him and is seen, loves Him and is loved,
> and becomes light, brilliant beyond words.[15]

Contemporary visitors to Athos can only go as pilgrims, not as tourists, and must enter from the sea by boat. A large sign on the departure dock warns that the entrance of women involves "serious penal sanctions." Monks justify this exclusion of women theologically by explaining that the patron saint of Athos, the Virgin Mary, is a jealous mistress who brooks no female rivals. They tell the story of an Empress of Byzantium who received special dispensation to visit Athos. But when her boat came a little more than 1,500 feet from the shore, Mary rose out of the sea with her hand outstretched and said, "This far and no farther." The ban on women extends to females of all species and has had the unintended consequence of preserving on Athos biodiversity found nowhere else in the Balkans: because they include female members, flocks of goats and

sheep have never been allowed onto the peninsula to graze and chew up the natural vegetation, as they have elsewhere. Nevertheless, like Mount Omine in Japan, Mount Athos is a World Heritage site that excludes half the human race, making the two sacred mountains focal points of continuing controversy and criticism.

On my journey to Athos, I went first to the Monastery of Grigoriou, perched on a rock directly above the sea on the steep flank of a rugged coastline of mountain slopes that looked like the Big Sur Coast of California, but dotted with monasteries and hermitages. The monks were celebrating Holy Week leading up to the resurrection on Easter, the most important date of the Christian calendar. On the night of my arrival, in an eerie coincidence just before the day marking the crucifixion of Jesus, an Australian Greek with cancer who had come to spend his last days with his monastic son at Grigoriou died. The next afternoon a friendly monk who had assumed the role of acting as my mentor took me to see the body, wrapped tightly in black cloth, and flexed the limbs and waist to show me how the special atmosphere created by the Virgin Mary kept corpses on Athos from freezing in rigor mortis. Many of the monks I met as I walked and took boats from monastery to monastery had scientific and engineering backgrounds, but nearly all of them believed in miracles as a natural part of everyday life. As far as I could tell, none of them would have batted an eye to see somebody walking on water, such was the reality in which they lived and practiced religion on Athos.

At a monastic community near the foot of Mount Athos, I met a French composer who had been commissioned to compose a piece of classical music by the city of Thessaloniki. He had come to wander around Athos in search of inspiration and had just returned from going partway up the sacred mountain. I had thought it was too early in the spring to climb Mount Athos without an ice axe and crampons, which I had left at home, but he told me there wasn't that much snow up high. Encouraged by his report, I decided to give it a try and set off by myself early in the morning. Climbing quickly up blue-shaded slopes through gradually thinning trees, I stopped to cut a walking stick. It felt light and warm in my hand and became a kind of friend – a pilgrim's staff for my day of being alone, like a hermit on Mount Athos. Higher up, near the summit, it saved my life. After scrambling up bare, rocky ground above the forest, I came on snow and followed tracks around to the sunless north side of the mountain. The steps became hard and icy, and my soft boots began to slip away. Below me a steep couloir arched over the top of a face hiding 1,000 feet of empty air. I reached up with my staff and rammed it into the snow. It held and I was able to pull myself up to safe ground.

An easy ridge led to the summit, crowned with a small chapel half-buried in snowdrifts and adorned with metal wires to fend off lightning strikes. Every August on the Feast of the Transfiguration, a procession of forty or fifty monks

climbs up the mountain to spend the night and conduct a service in this, the fittingly named, Chapel of the Transfiguration – hopefully avoiding transfiguration by lightning. Looking north toward the Greek mainland, I could see nearly all the monasteries of Athos scattered along the length of the peninsula in clusters of tiny grey dots, some speckled with flecks of red marking their roofs. In the other direction, the blue waters of the Aegean Sea far below me extended off into the amorphous distance to blend smoothly into the blue sky so that I could not tell where one ended and the other began. I stood there for a long time absorbed in the wonder of contemplating the circle of vast, limitless views spreading out to the surrounding world from the summit of Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain of Greece.

NORTHERN EUROPE

From the grassy hills and peaks of the British Isles to the ice-capped ranges of Scandinavia, the mountains of Northern Europe form the scattered remnants of an archaic plateau that rose up long before the rest of the continent came into existence. Once as high and jagged as the Alps, these mountains have been worn down by wave after wave of glacial ice. Their ancient forms, wrinkled and gouged by ages of erosion, provide an ideal setting for myths and legends that tell of gods and spirits who have haunted the earth since the beginning of time. Walking across their moors and through their forests, scrambling over their crags and up their peaks, one feels the presence of an older, more mysterious reality waiting to reveal itself when the mists blow in and blot out the world of familiar experience.

The people who populated the mountains of Scandinavia with the gods of Norse mythology came from the region of Europe north of the Alps. Beginning in the second millennium BCE, Teutonic tribes speaking Germanic languages gradually moved up to the area occupied today by the countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. They brought with them a pre-Christian religion that dominated a vast region which included the territory of modern-day Germany. As Christianity advanced north from Rome in the first millennium CE, destroying pagan beliefs and practices, this Norse religion withdrew to ever remoter regions of the far north. In the ninth century Vikings carried it to Iceland, where the only substantial records of the ancient Germanic and Scandinavian deities have survived, preserved in texts written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Although Scandinavia belongs to the same Indo-European family of cultures as Greece and India, its mythology makes no mention of a sacred mountain comparable in stature to Mount Olympos or Mount Meru. In place of such a mountain, we find a mythical tree named Yggdrasill which acts as a cosmic axis linking together the various levels of existence. From the twisted depths of

its gnarled roots to the open heights of its overarching branches, it reaches up to spread out and encompass the four major divisions of the cosmos: the realm of the dead, the land of the giants, the world of human beings, and Asgard, the abode of the gods. Two of the most important deities of Asgard, however, reside on high places that appear to be mountains of a divine nature. Odin, the chief of the gods, master of war and wisdom, has an elevated seat from which he can survey all that takes place below him. The *Eddas*, medieval works of Scandinavian mythology preserved in Iceland, describe this seat as though it were placed on top of a mountain:

> There is a place there [in Asgard] called Hlidskjalf, and when Odin sat there on his high seat he saw over the whole world and what everyone was doing, and he understood everything he saw.

The image recalls that of Zeus in Homer, seated on a crag of Olympos. The name of Odin's high place, Hlidskjalf, means "hill or rock with an opening," reinforcing the impression of a rocky peak overlooking a view of the world of mortals spread out beneath the abode of the gods.[16]

The other deity, Heimdall, guardian of Asgard, dwells on Himinbjörg, the "Mountain of Heaven." His residence stands at the upper end of Bifröst, a rainbow bridge that reaches up in a shining arc to link the world of men to the abode of the gods. The *Eddas* tell us that Heimdall, known as the White God, can see hundreds of leagues by day or night and hear all sounds, even the whisper of grass as it grows on the earth below. Seated on his sacred mountain, he guards the bridge against the giants who threaten to storm the heights of heaven. When they finally do, at the end of the world, he will stand up on Himinbjörg and blow his horn to announce the dreaded beginning of Ragnarök, the "Twilight of the Gods."[17]

Valhalla or Valhöll, the name of Odin's palace in heaven, where warriors killed in battle go, probably comes from an older word meaning the "Rock of the Slain." Such a meaning would have had its origins in an ancient belief that the dead entered rocks and mountains to dwell within them, continuing to feast and fight as they did in life. The Viking sagas give us a vivid impression of the veneration accorded one such mountain in Iceland by a chieftain named Thorolf:

> On this headland is a mountain held so sacred by Thorolf that no one was allowed even to look at it without first having washed himself, and no living creatures on this mountain, neither men nor beasts, were to be harmed unless they left it of their own accord. Thorolf called this mountain Helgafell, the Holy Mountain, and believed that he and his kinsmen would go into it when they died.

When an important landowner dies, his shepherd has a vision in which he sees the side of Helgafell open up to receive his master, who is welcomed by a host

of merry Vikings noisily drinking and feasting by great fires burning brightly within the mountain. As this passage indicates, the old Norsemen viewed the underground abodes of the dead inside mountains as heavens rather than hells.[18]

Mountains also have a somber, demonic aspect as sacred places in Scandinavian mythology and folklore. The realm of the frost giants, who threatened the gods and would someday help to bring about the end of the world, lay somewhere to the north in a place of ice and snow far from human habitation. In the nineteenth century Norwegians, looking back to their Viking heritage, took the name of this place, Jotunheim or the "Land of the Giants," and applied it to the highest mountains in Scandinavia, a wild range of peaks and glaciers rising to 8,100 feet above the fjords of southern Norway. Henrik Ibsen drew inspiration from these rugged mountains of misty rock and ice to create the eerie, troll-infested setting for his well-known play *Peer Gynt*, set to music by Edvard Grieg in his composition of the same name, which includes the well-known movement "In the Hall of the Mountain King." Today an extensive network of trails and huts allows cross-country skiers to skim with ease across the high and dangerous snowfields once haunted by the frost giants of ancient myth. It bears mention that Norse mythology includes a ski goddess named Skadi, who married a god of the sea and from whom she separated on account of their incompatibility – she unwilling to live down in fjords and he up in mountains.[19]

Because of their common heritage, the Germans to the south shared much of the same mythology. The most eerie and vivid belief in demonic places and spirits in the Scandinavian and Germanic world hovered around the misty heights of the Harz Mountains, a forested range in central Germany. The specter of the Brocken, a ghostly image projected by the observer's own shadow on the clouds that often enshroud the highest peak, enhanced the mystique of these mountains as the sinister haunt of satanic beings, both human and inhuman. The Chinese, in striking contrast, viewed the same optical phenomenon on sacred mountains as divine manifestations of the Buddha's Glory. The Harz Mountains became renowned as the site of the most famous gathering of witches and devils in Western folklore and literature, Walpurgis Night, immortalized most dramatically in Goethe's *Faust*. The following passage from the play describes the uncanny atmosphere of the scene as Faust, in the company of the devil, Mephistopheles, approaches the summit of the Brocken to take part in the orgiastic carnival of evil:

> The winds are hushed, the stars are pale,
> The mournful moon puts on her veil.
> In wild career the witches' choir
> Scatters a thousand sparks of fire.[20]

When Christianity took over the Roman Empire in the first half of the first millennium, it reduced the divinities of springs and other features of the natural landscape to demons and evil spirits antagonistic to the new religion. Christian missionaries deliberately cleared away forests and cut down sacred groves where pagan rituals traditionally took place as a means of putting such practices to an end. The forested slopes of the Harz Mountains were probably a major site for pre-Christian rites that became associated with witchcraft in the beliefs of later Europeans. In any case, Christians inspired by the writings of early theologians such as Augustine tended to view wilderness – and the mountains that formed a particularly wild and uncontrollable part of it – as the corrupt domain of the evil powers of nature that the Church had to suppress in order to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Like the Germanic tribes who took over Scandinavia, the ancient Celts of Gaul, a group of Indo-European peoples who controlled a region that includes modern-day France and Switzerland, regarded mountains as places sacred to the gods. Around 500 BCE they carried their deities across the English Channel to install a number of them on the hills and peaks of the British Isles. Where the memory of these gods disappeared on the continent, succumbing to Christian missionaries in the first millennium CE, they survived in remote strongholds of Celtic culture such as Ireland – and in the humanized form of heroes and heroines of Arthurian legend. Unlike their colleagues on the mainland, Irish monks took an interest in their cultural heritage and wrote down extensive descriptions of the pagan beliefs and practices they destroyed.

According to the epic cycles of Irish mythology preserved by these monks, the Tuatha Dé Danann, a tribe of Celtic deities descended from the goddess Danu, came riding in mist to conquer the land and become the gods of ancient Ireland. Their divine rule continued until the religious power of Christianity overwhelmed them in the first half of the first millennium CE. After their defeat the Tuatha Dé Danann retreated into underground worlds and palaces concealed within mound-shaped hills called *sídh*. Hidden from the sight and knowledge of the outside world, the gods underwent a transformation in which they became fairy-like beings of later Irish folklore. Known as the *sídhe*, the people of the enchanted hills, they roam the countryside with the wind, casting spells on whomever they meet and bearing them away to their magic realms within the earth. There in the paradises of the fairy gods lies all a man or woman could want: every delight of body and soul, eternal youth and soothing peace, and not the slightest trace of death nor grief. In some stories the human hero seeks, and occasionally finds, within a subterranean paradise of the *sídhe*, a magic cauldron of plenty that has the power to restore the dead to life. This huge bowl of Celtic myth mixed with Christian ideas of a sacred chalice to become in time the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, sought by the knights of the Round Table. In the epic poem *Parzival* by the German poet Wolfram von

Eschenbach, the purest of these seekers, Parzival or Sir Perceval, happens on the Grail in a magic castle located, significantly, on a hill named Munsalvaesche, the Wild Mountain – which Richard Wagner in his well-known opera *Parsifal* renamed Montsalvat, the Mount of Salvation. The company of mysterious knights who guard this castle and its treasure probably have their origins in Celtic gods who once dwelled and were worshipped on hills throughout the British Isles.[21]

In legendary accounts of the life of King Arthur, when it comes time for him to die, ethereal maidens come to take him away in a boat to the Isle of Avalon, an idyllic land of perpetual spring and eternal youth. Later legends shifted the location of this earthly paradise from the distant reaches of the sea to the interior of hills that had been the abode of the *sídhe*, or their English equivalents. People came to believe that Arthur had not died, but lay asleep within some magic hill, waiting to awaken and return as the once and future king of Britain. Some identified his blissful resting place with Mount Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who composed a mythical history of Britain in the twelfth century, a pair of chained eagles watched over the grave of Arthur on the heights of this sacred peak. There, in a haunting landscape of windswept crags and misty tarns, one could easily imagine figures of the mythic past come back to life – awesome figures like Rhita Gawr, greatest of the legendary giants, and Brenin Llwyd, the Grey King of mysterious disappearances.[22]

Glastonbury Tor and Croagh Patrick

The place most commonly associated with the Isle of Avalon is the mound-shaped hill of Glastonbury Tor in southern England. Situated next to the ancient town of Glastonbury, it rises like an island over a green sea of surrounding meadowland that used to be covered with marshes. According to legend, some thirty years after the crucifixion of Christ, Saint Joseph of Arimathea came from Jerusalem with the sacred blood of Jesus in the chalice of the Holy Grail to establish the first church in Britain at the foot of this hill. Whatever the historical authenticity of the story, Glastonbury was one of the earliest Christian sites in England, probably founded in the first or second century CE. Many years later, in 1191, guided by a prophecy and a vision, monks reportedly discovered the remains of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, buried in a grave in the ancient abbey of the town. Since that time local tradition has identified Glastonbury with the resting place of Arthur and the Grail, the two most evocative icons of English history and romance.

A legend that may have originally inspired this identification tells us that Glastonbury Tor was once the castle of Gwynn, an ancient British god of an idyllic paradise equivalent to the fairy realms hidden in the hills of Irish myth

and folklore. Gwynn heard that a Welsh saint named Collen, who was meditating in a cell on the lower slopes of the hill, had made disparaging remarks about him. Summoned by the deity to explain himself, Collen climbed to the top of Glastonbury Tor. There he found a magnificent castle filled with lovely people and beautiful music. Gwynn politely offered him some food, but Saint Collen refused to take any, gazing with scorn on the merriment around him. Declaring the Celtic god a demon, he cast holy water over the crowd, and the castle vanished, leaving only a barren summit, swept by the wind. As a monument to the triumph of the Christian faith, a ruined chapel now stands on the hill once revered as a paradise of the ancient gods. It bears the name of Saint Michael, the archangel who in the Bible slays Satan in the form of a dragon and leads the hosts of heaven against the forces of evil.[23]

The aura of Celtic myth and Arthurian legend that envelopes the sacred hill has made it a major center for people with a variety of esoteric interests. Many come to draw spiritual sustenance from the reddish waters that flow from Chalice Well, a spring believed to issue from the buried Grail. A recent hypothesis that has aroused a great deal of interest speculates that a series of grassy terraces ringing Glastonbury Tor represent an ancient labyrinth imposed on the hill for ritual purposes. People who have weaved back and forth across the hillside, following the pathway of this labyrinth to its end on the summit, have reported profound experiences of power and awakening, as though they were tracing a spiritual path toward enlightenment.[24]

As the placement of a chapel dedicated to Saint Michael on top of Glastonbury Tor suggests, the introduction of Christianity did not always lead to the demonization of hills sacred to older deities. Rather than become the haunt of a devil, a prominent hill could become the shrine of a saint who overcame pagan gods perceived as demons. Such appears to have happened in the case of Croagh Patrick, the major holy mountain of modern Ireland. An impressive pyramid of quartzite rock, it rises in grand simplicity to a height of 2,507 feet in County Mayo. Nearly 50,000 pilgrims a year climb the mountain, many of them barefoot on their knees, to pay reverence to Saint Patrick, enshrined in a chapel on its summit.

According to legend, Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, climbed to the top of this mountain in the fifth century and rang a bell to banish snakes and other noxious creatures from the country as an important part of his mission to convert the Irish to Christianity. Most accounts claim that like Jesus in the test that culminated on the Mount of Temptation, he spent the forty days and nights of Lent on the summit of Croagh Patrick. Since the Christian tradition associates the serpent with Satan in the story of Adam and Eve, it seems likely that the legend of banishing snakes on top of the peak is telling us that Saint Patrick exorcised a Celtic god viewed as a demon or as Satan himself. In the process he replaced the pagan deity as the source of the mountain's sanctity.[25]

THE ALPS

Squeezed up in successive folds by the pressing together of tectonic plates, the Alps curve in an arc from southern France in the west to Austria and Slovenia in the east. Along the way they pass through or skirt the countries of Switzerland, Italy, Lichtenstein, and Germany. The peaks themselves range in type from the granitic massif of Mont Blanc to the limestone towers of the Dolomites. To complement the complexity of their geological structure, the mountains shelter within their deeply cut valleys a multitude of different peoples and cultures. Reflecting this cultural diversity, Switzerland, the country most closely identified with the Alps, has four national languages – French, German, Italian, and Romansh.

Although Olympos and Athos stand out as the major sacred mountains of Europe, the Alps define, for much of the Western world, the paradigm of mountain perfection. Three of these mountains – Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, and the Eiger – come immediately to mind as embodiments of three essential attributes of what many would consider the perfect mountain. The clean white summit of Mont Blanc, the highest in the Alps, embodies our image of the ultimate mountain as a vision of transcendent purity, floating like a cloud in the deep blue sky. The finely pointed peak of the Matterhorn represents the inspiring ideal of a perfect pyramid of rock sharpened with glistening streaks of ice and snow. The grim north face of the Eiger, whose name means the "Ogre," sets the standard for extreme and terrifying ascents that take mountaineers to the edge of death – and beyond.

Today the Alps are esteemed as places of beauty and inspiration. Many regard them as a kind of paradise on earth, a heavenly refuge from the ugly realities of the modern industrial world. Millions of tourists come up to their valleys each year to ski, climb, hike, and generally escape from the tedium of their daily lives. It may come as a surprise to learn that Europeans have not always regarded the Alps in such a positive light, that, in fact, only 300 years ago they shunned them as horrifying mountains to avoid or, if that should prove impossible, to cross in the greatest possible haste. John Evelyn, an Englishman who traveled over the Simplon Pass on his way to Italy in 1646, described the Alps as "strange, horrid, and fearful crags and tracts, abounding in pine trees, and only inhabited by bears, wolves, and wild goats." Where the modern traveler finds peaceful valleys surrounded by beautiful peaks, Evelyn, in a response typical of his times, found a fearsome haunt of terrifying scenery and ferocious beasts.[26]

Others had even stronger reactions to the Alps, finding them aesthetically offensive and even morally repugnant. Thomas Burnet, an Englishman who visited the Alps shortly after Evelyn, wrote in his influential work, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*:

> 'Tis prodigious to see and to consider of what Extent these Heaps of Stones and Rubbish are! . . . in what Confusion do they lie? They have

> neither Form nor Beauty, nor Shape, nor Order . . . There is nothing in Nature more shapeless and ill-figured than an old Rock or a Mountain . . . I fancy, if we had seen the Mountains, when they were new born and raw . . . the Fractions and Confusions of them would have appeared very ghastly and frightful.[27]

So much for the Alps as sacred mountains – at least in Burnet's sacred theory of the earth. The sentiments expressed in this passage derive from a view, widely held in Europe at the time, that regarded mountains as irregular blemishes disfiguring the smooth and perfect surface of the land. English poets of the period commonly referred to them as warts, pimples, and blisters on the face of the earth. The grandeur and wildness of mountains that makes them so attractive to us seemed to them to violate the sense of proportion and symmetry, balance and harmony, required of an ideal landscape pleasing to God.

Yet just as the sacred both repels and attracts, mountains also held a paradoxical fascination for Burnet, a fascination that evoked a sense of their divine, as well as demonic, character. In the very same work, he writes:

> next to the Great Concave of the Heavens, and those boundless Regions where the Stars inhabit, there is nothing that I look upon with more Pleasure than the wide Sea and the Mountains of the Earth. There is something august and stately in the Air of these things, that inspires the Mind with great Thoughts and Passions; we do naturally, upon such Occasions, think of God and his Greatness.[28]

A different view was emerging, one that would lead to our modern appreciation of mountains as sublime, even divine, manifestations of nature. The mixture of fear and fascination characteristic of the experience of the sacred appears in the impressions of a traveler who visited the Alps only a few years later, in 1701:

> At one sight of the walks, you have a near prospect of the Alps, which are broken into so many steps and precipices, that they fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror.[29]

Here the author takes a shiver of delight in the horror that the mountains inspire.

Over the next 100 years a radical transformation took place in European perceptions of the Alps. The writings of Albrecht von Haller and Jean-Jacques Rousseau extolling the virtues of Swiss peasants and Alpine views combined with a growing scientific interest in nature to awaken a new appreciation of mountains as places of divine inspiration and spiritual renewal. Writers of the Romantic Period came to regard the Alps as symbols of the infinite, worthy of depiction in literature and art. In 1790 William Wordsworth crossed the Simplon Pass. The very same scenery that had aroused horror and disgust in

John Evelyn 150 years previously inspired Wordsworth to compose some of the most memorable lines in English poetry:

> . . . The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
> The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
> And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
> Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfettered clouds and regions of the heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
> Were all like working of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Character of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.[30]

The wildness and irregularity of the mountains have become sublime manifestations of a divine presence infusing the world and resolving its oppositions.

Many scholars, most notably Marjorie Hope Nicholson, have interpreted this change of attitude as the emergence of an unprecedented new appreciation of mountains in Europe. According to this interpretation, the development of scientific understanding and the creation of an aesthetic of the sublime caused Europeans to cast off aversions and fears of mountains for the first time and to venture up to the heights in search of knowledge, recreation, and spiritually uplifting experiences.[31]

But if we look more deeply, what we actually see is not the simple appearance of an entirely new appreciation of mountains, but an interweaving of two attitudes toward the Alps in which one recedes into the background as the other comes to the fore. These attitudes both have their origins in the distant past and reflect two views of the sacred that we have encountered in other parts of the world: the sacred as the divine and the sacred as the demonic. The first view we can trace back to the Celts with the help of records preserved by monks in Ireland and England and the second to Christian missionaries who demonized earlier pagan beliefs and practices.

The Celts who controlled the Alps before the Roman conquest of northern Europe in the first century BCE probably worshipped high peaks as the abode of a sky god, whom the Romans called Jupiter Poeninus, "Jupiter of the Mountains," from *penn*, the Celtic word for "mountain." The ruins of a temple dedicated to this deity stand on the summit of the Great Saint

Bernard Pass, placed there for the protection of travelers. When Christianity took over the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, Christian missionaries destroyed all traces of pagan beliefs regarding the Alps. Records of Celtic and Germanic lore preserved in the British Isles and Ireland suggest that the Celts to the south regarded Alpine peaks as abodes of the gods. As an Indo-European people with a related language and mythology, they probably shared with the ancient Greeks a reverence for the mountains among which they lived.

Written records of a positive perception of the Alps after the advent of Christianity extend back to at least the fourteenth century CE, if not earlier. In 1335 the Italian poet Petrarch, responding to an inner urge, climbed Mount Ventoux, a minor but prominent peak 6,270 feet high, and wrote a letter describing his experience. As he struggled up the steep, tiring slopes, he compared the physical ascent of the mountain to the spiritual progress of the soul, a comparison that gave him the energy to overcome his inertia and continue to the top. His awe-struck impressions standing on the summit reveal a clear link in his mind between Mount Ventoux and the sacred mountains of Greece:

> At first, I was so affected by the unaccustomed spirit of the air, and by the free prospect, that I stood as one stupefied. I looked back; clouds were beneath my feet. I began to understand Athos and Olympos, since I found that what I heard and read of them was true of a mountain of far less celebrity.

However, another attitude toward mountains put an abrupt end to his enjoyment of the moment. Uplifted by his spiritual contemplation of the mountain scenery, Petrarch turned to a copy of Augustine's *Confessions* that he was carrying with him and opened the book to the following passage: "There are men who go to admire the high places of mountains, the great waves of the sea, the wide currents of rivers, the circuit of the ocean, and the orbits of the stars – and who neglect themselves." Dismayed and ashamed at his reaction to the mountain, he wrote, "I shut the book half angry with myself, that I, who was even now admiring terrestrial things, ought already to have learnt from the philosophers that nothing is truly great except the soul." He descended in glum silence and wrote later, "I looked back to the summit of the mountain, which seemed but a cubit high in comparison with the height of human contemplation, were it not too often merged in the corruptions of the earth."[32]

Although many have regarded Petrarch as unique for his time in his appreciation of mountains, other Europeans of the period shared his initially positive regard for the heights. In fact, some Germans were reportedly climbing peaks and expressing enthusiasm for them as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries. Pilgrimages to Christian shrines on alpine summits belie the simplistic notion that mountains were universally condemned by the Catholic Church. In 1358,

in fulfillment of a vow he had made on escaping from the Moors, Bonifacio Rotario of Asti built a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary on top of Roche Melon (Rocciamelone in Italian), an outlying peak of the Alps 11,608 feet high. Shortly thereafter the people of the region initiated the festival of Our Lady of the Snows in which a procession of pilgrims climbed the mountain each year on August 5, carrying a statue of Mary from the cathedral in Susa to her shrine on the summit of Roche Melon – a pilgrimage that has continued to this day. In the *Divine Comedy*, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri thought enough of mountains to make the ascent of Mount Purgatory the allegorical route of spiritual redemption leading to the earthly paradise on its summit and communion with God in the heavens above.[33]

Some 200 years later, in the sixteenth century, the Swiss philosopher and scientist Conrad Gesner, in sharp contrast to Petrarch, felt no compunction at all over expressing his appreciation of mountains. He made it a practice to climb a few each year "partly for the sake of bodily exercise and the delight of the spirit." He regarded the Alps as fitting objects of spiritual contemplation, as his words in a letter to a friend so clearly show:

> For how great the pleasure, how great, think you, are the joys of the spirit, touched as is fit it should be, in wondering at the mighty mass of mountains while gazing upon their immensity and, as it were, in lifting one's head among the clouds. In some way or other the mind is overturned by their dizzying heights and is caught up in contemplation of the Supreme Architect.[34]

Gesner was well aware of the other attitude toward the Alps, which regarded them not only as terrifying, ugly places to avoid, but also as the cursed haunts of evil spirits and demonic beings. In 1555 he climbed Mount Pilatus, a small peak near Lausanne, named for the spirit of Pontius Pilate believed to reside in a marshy pond just below its summit. According to a legend reported by Gesner, the body of Pilate, who had ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, was thrown into this pond after being rejected elsewhere. The people of Lausanne believed that his evil spirit would cause terrible storms if anyone threw anything in the water; the authorities, therefore, had forbidden anyone from climbing the mountain without an official along to make sure the ghost was not disturbed. The natives held this belief so strongly that in 1307 six clergymen had been sentenced to prison for attempting to climb Mount Pilatus without permission. Although Gesner debunked the legend as superstition, he had to take along an officially appointed guide. Thirty years after his ascent, in 1585, Johann Müller finally punctured the belief when, in the company of a large number of witnesses, he threw stones in the lake, defying Pilate to do his worst – and nothing happened.[35]

Beliefs in other demonic beings were not so easily dispelled. Many Europeans regarded mountains as the favorite lair of dragons, a view that lingered well into the eighteenth century. Stories about meeting them on the summits of high peaks abounded, and almost everyone assumed as a matter of course that they existed, along with other flora and fauna of the Alps. Johann Jacob Scheuchzer of Zurich, a professor of physics who formulated the first scientific theory of glaciers, also produced a matter-of-fact catalogue of Swiss dragons. The best specimens, he wrote, were to be found in the sparsely inhabited canton of Grisons: "That land is so mountainous and well provided with caves, that it would be odd not to find dragons there." A belief that the devil resided near the summit of the Matterhorn and hurled rocks down into the valleys interfered with attempts to climb the mountain in the nineteenth century.[36]

Most Europeans regarded the Alps and the Pyrenees as the special haunt of witches, believed to ride the wild winds and storms that swirled about their rocky peaks. The witch-craze that sent many an innocent woman to a flaming death took possession of these mountains in the thirteenth century, two centuries before it descended to sweep like wildfire across the plains of Europe. The presence of heretical sects, such as the Albigensians and the Vaudois, who had sought refuge from persecution in remote mountainous valleys, reinforced a widespread belief that witches controlled the heights, where they practiced satanic arts abhorrent and dangerous to God-fearing Christians.[37]

In the folklore and beliefs of Alpine villagers, the spirits of the dead wandered the heights in torment and lay imprisoned in the icy depths of glaciers. Sinuous lines of lights flickering across meadows and mountains revealed the paths taken by ethereal processions of the damned. Various glaciers in the region of Mont Blanc acted as frigid purgatories in which the souls of those who had committed forgivable sins gradually tunneled their way out by scraping at the ice with a tiny pin. Taking pity on these lost souls, villagers would come up to dig on the surface and help them escape to paradise. One story about the Aletsch Glacier, the largest in the Alps, tells of a young student who peered over the shoulder of his religious teacher to see the blue depths of a crevasse crammed full of ghostly heads.[38]

Supernatural beings who might seem demonic sometimes took on a benevolent character, reflecting the ambivalent nature of the sacred. The villagers of Breuil on the Italian side of the Matterhorn used to tell of a wild man who dwelled in chalets of the wind and taught their ancestors everything they needed to know to live in the mountains – such essentials as how to cure their cows of sickness and how to make cream and cheese. In some of their tales, this benefactor assumed the form of a giant. In ancient times, according to a legend recorded in the nineteenth century, the Matterhorn did not exist: a long

horizontal ridge stood in its place, separating the valleys of Switzerland from those of Italy. One day the giant wanted to see what lay on the other side and stepped across the barrier, smashing through it with his boots. The ridge shattered, and the pyramid of rock left standing between his legs became the Matterhorn we see today.[39]

Mont Blanc

The highest mountain in the Alps, Mont Blanc sits like a monarch on a throne supported by lesser mountains. Its summit, a white dome of snow 15,781 feet high, overlooks a great massif of jagged pinnacles and sweeping glaciers. So many buttresses and sub-peaks surround it that one has difficulty seeing it from its base. The mountain demands that one come up to pay homage to it. An intrusion of igneous rock raised up from an ancient sea, glaciers have scoured out its softer portions, leaving needles of granite arrayed before its highest peak, like warriors with lances uplifted to guard their king – the Aiguille du Midi, the Grandes Jorasses, the Dru, the Grépon, and numerous others. An enormous mountain, Mont Blanc rises higher above its much lower base than does Mount Everest.

The history of Mont Blanc and its ascents exemplifies the change in attitude that swept the Alps and other peaks of Europe. A story about the defeat of Satan on the Great Saint Bernard Pass illustrates the way in which Christianity converted pre-Christian mountain deities into demons and replaced them with saints. According to a version recorded in the sixteenth century, the Devil inhabited a colossal statue on top of the pass. When Saint Bernard approached the pass, seeking to open a route through it, Satan covered the mountains with deep snow and filled the sky with seething black clouds. Lightning flashed and thunder roared, making the air sizzle with fire. Unperturbed, Saint Bernard held forth his staff and advanced on the devil. Despite Satan's efforts, the saint reached the top and dealt the statue a great blow, so that it crumbled and turned to dust. Then he exorcised the devil and banished him to dwell within Mont Blanc until the end of time. A painting at the Great Saint Bernard Hospice, famous for its rescue dogs, shows the saint standing on a prostrate Satan, holding him on a chain connected to a collar around his neck, like a dog on a leash. The statue in the legend derives from a memory of the temple to the Celtic sky god Jupiter Poeninus and the way in which Christians made the deity a manifestation of Satan.[40]

Perhaps because of this legend, until the eighteenth century the local people knew Mont Blanc as Mont Maudit, the "Accursed Mountain." Outsiders drawn by its height and beauty saw it in a new light and renamed it Mont Blanc, the "White Mountain." The German poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang Goethe visited the town of Chamonix at the foot of the peak in

1779. His impressions on seeing Mont Blanc at night, as its summit came into view, hovering among the stars, reflect the great change in attitude toward the Alps that took place in the eighteenth century:

> The stars came out one by one, and we noticed above the summits of the mountains before us a light we could not explain. It was clear, without brilliance, like the Milky Way, but more dense, a bit like the Pleiades, only more extensive. For a long time the sight of it riveted our attention. Finally, as we shifted our position, like a pyramid illuminated by a mysterious, inner light – comparable to the phosphorescence of a glow worm – it appeared to soar above the summits of all the mountains; and we knew that it could only be the summit of Mont Blanc. The beauty of this view was quite extraordinary. Shining among the stars that surrounded it, glittering not as brightly, but with a vaster, more coherent mass, the mountain appeared to belong to a higher sphere.[41]

With the full development of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, the Alps transcended the sublime to become themselves embodiments of the infinite. The English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was so overwhelmed by the sight of Mont Blanc that he wrote a poem dedicated to it in which he addressed the mountain as a manifestation of divinity itself:

> Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
> Mont Blanc appears – still, snowy, and serene –
> . . . . . .
> Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
> Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
> By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
> Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.
> . . . . . .
> Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: – the power is there,
> The still and solemn power of many sights,
> And many sounds, and much of life and death.
> . . . . . .
> . . . The secret strength of things,
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee![42]

Mont Blanc has become for Shelley the infinite itself, fully endowed with the life and power of the source and ruler of all that is.

This sense of the sublime, verging on the divine, helped to launch the modern sport of alpinism, which began with the first ascent of Mont Blanc by Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard in 1786, only seven years after Goethe visited Chamonix. Horace Bénédict de Saussure, the Swiss scientist who offered a prize for this achievement and who is regarded as the father of mountaineering, was driven to climb the mountain by the same feelings of

awe and exaltation that moved Goethe and, later, Shelley to write about it. On his own attempt to make an ascent of Mont Blanc in 1785, a night view of the surrounding mountains from high on the peak had a profound effect on him:

> [T]he brilliance of the stars, which at this height had ceased to twinkle, cast over the mountain-tops a pale glow, extremely faint, but enough to show their power and distance. The restfulness and the utter silence reigning in the vast spaces spread out before my eyes, which imagination pictured vaster still, inspired in me a feeling akin to terror: I seemed to be the sole survivor of the universe, and that it was its corpse I saw stretched beneath my feet.

After he fulfilled his dream by reaching the summit in 1787, he returned to Mont Blanc the following year and had a more joyous, but equally powerful, experience of the mountain, this one in moonlight:

> These fields of snow and cliffs of ice, too dazzling to be looked at in the day, what a wondrous and enchanting spectacle they present under the soft beams of the torch of night! What a magnificent contrast the dark granite rocks afford, standing out in sharp, bold outlines against the gleaming snow! Was ever such a moment given for meditation? What pains and hardships are not paid in full by moments such as these! The soul of man is lifted up, a wider, nobler horizon is offered to his view; surrounded by such silent majesty he seems to hear the very voice of Nature, and to become her confidant, to whom she tells the most secret of her operations.[43]

From Mont Blanc practitioners of the new sport of mountaineering ventured to other peaks of the Alps and from there to more distant ranges – the Andes, the Rocky Mountains, the Caucasus, and the Himalayas. The mountain itself continued to provide inspiration for mountaineers of succeeding generations, offering ever more challenging routes up its many faces and ridges and its even more numerous peaks and needles. The words of Gaston Rébuffat, one of the great French climbers of the twentieth century, reveal the kind of mystical fascination that Mont Blanc continues to have for modern climbers. He describes how as a boy he felt himself drawn to the mountain as a pilgrim to Mecca and the wonder he experienced on seeing it for the first time – and thereafter:

> At last one day the narrow valley suddenly fanned out. The dream cherished for so many fervent evenings crystallized and took shape: there stood Mont Blanc, ideally beautiful. It was only later, after having seen it a thousand and one times, that I noticed its structure, so sober it is. There is equilibrium in the composition of the massif and measure in the grouping of the satellites around the main summit, somewhat set back, as it should be. The forms born of the union of snow and rock seem to soar, despite their mass. How simple and how just the name: Mont Blanc.[44]

Unlike the highest peaks of most other major mountain ranges, as of the first part of 2020, Mont Blanc lacked any kind of environmental protection, such as forming part of a national park. The mayors of towns around the mountain have successfully resisted any measures that might put restrictions on tourism or other kinds of income-generating business. Members of Mountain Wilderness International, a European organization dedicated to preserving the pristine nature of mountains, have led a long campaign to establish protections for Mont Blanc, trying, among other things, to get it nominated as a World Heritage site. As a member of the board of Mountain Wilderness, I joined a demonstration in 2000 that they organized to call attention to the problem. After marching down a major avenue in Geneva, we moved to Mont Blanc and hiked in the vicinity of the mountain with balloons that read in French, "For the Protection of Mont Blanc." Twenty years later, in a potentially promising move at the beginning of 2020, President Emmanuel Macron of France vowed to create a protected nature preserve around Mont Blanc. Local officials followed up by designating a small area protected, but how much more will actually get done remains to be seen, given objections to even that little protection by the Italian government.[45]

Reverence for mountains in Europe continues to express itself in both traditional and nontraditional ways. Shrines on hills and peaks throughout the continent still attract Christian pilgrims in great numbers. They go to venerate saints who have, in many cases, replaced the pre-Christian gods who used to hallow the heights of sacred mountains such as Croagh Patrick and Mount Athos. Among the most popular of these saints are Saint Michael and the Virgin Mary. Shrines to Saint Michael, the archangel traditionally associated with the Church's efforts to overcome the demonic forces of heathenism, stand spectacularly situated on prominent hills and crags, most notably the rocky promontories of Saint Michael's Mount in Cornwall and Mont Saint Michel on the northwest coast of France. More than a million pilgrims visit Mont Saint Michel each year, mixing with tourists who come to view the abbey on its miniature mountain above the sea. In addition, many go on pilgrimage to the famous *sacri monti* or sacred mountains of Piedmont and Lombardy in northern Italy, nine hills with chapels called calvaries built between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries and filled with beautiful works of art. Architectural and other features on each one of these "mountains" represent various stations of the cross along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, culminating in the highest point commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus on the Hill of Calvary.[46]

The Virgin Mary draws her devotees to higher and more impressive peaks. In the festival of Our Lady of the Snows, a procession of pilgrims carries her statue up icy cliffs to a chapel near the summit of Roche Melon, at 11,608 feet the highest pilgrimage site in the Alps – and probably all of Europe. A much

greater number of pilgrims journey up to a monastery perched in a rock gully high on the side of Montserrat, a 4,054-foot mountain of spectacular spires in northern Spain, near Barcelona. They go there to venerate the black Madonna, an image of the Virgin Mary said to have been miraculously discovered by shepherds in the Middle Ages. Because of the sandstone towers that line its serrated crest like the turrets of a castle, medieval legends associate Montserrat with the mysterious castle of the Grail Quest. Richard Wagner used the mountain and its monastery as a model for Montsalvat or the Mountain of Salvation, the name he gave this legendary castle in his opera *Parsifal*.

When my wife and I drove up to Montserrat, a dense layer of clouds hid the mountain from view. As we started up from the valley at its base, the overture to *Parsifal* began to play on the car radio. Gazing at the grey murk that soon enveloped us, my wife said, "Well, we're not going to have any views today." "Let's wait and see what happens," I replied. Just at the moment the music climaxed in a dramatic finale, we emerged into sunlight beneath a shining blue sky to see the rock towers soaring over a silver sea of clouds like a vision of Valhalla from Wagner's Ring Cycle. The timing could not have been more perfect.

Many of the tourists, hikers, and climbers who throng to the heights of Europe also seek the inspiration of the sacred – but in their own, less traditional, ways. The beauty and challenge that draw them to peaks like Mont Blanc and the Eiger conceal a deeper, more spiritual source of attraction. A number of the tourists who come to gaze on views of the Alps harbor a secret longing to glimpse a vision of transcendent power and mystery lacking in the mundane concerns of their everyday lives. Hikers who venture deeper into the mountains willingly put up with fatigue and discomfort in order to experience the world anew – as a primordial paradise untouched by the inventions of modern man. Many climbers who risk their lives on dangerous routes, such as the North Face of the Eiger, unwittingly seek a jolt of fear to awaken them from the slumber of spiritual complacency. Others climb mountains in search of the joy and freedom they find in transcending the earth and touching the sky.

Although they tend to feel embarrassed about discussing the subject, climbers occasionally acknowledge the religious underpinnings of their fascination with mountains. In 1918 H. E. M. Stutfield gave a talk to the British Alpine Club titled "Mountaineering as a Religion," in which he pointed out a number of striking similarities between the modern sport of mountaineering and the traditional practice of religion. His observations elicited an enthusiastic response from the Reverend F. T. Wethered, a climber and cleric, who wrote in a letter to the *Alpine Journal*, "The mountains have done the spiritual side of me more good religiously, as well as in my body physically, than anything else in the world. No one knows who and what God is until he has seen some real mountaineering and climbing in the Alps."[47]

In an age that increasingly values material accomplishment above everything else, the quest for the sacred in the heights of Europe may seem a quaint anachronism. From its beginnings in the Alps in the eighteenth century, critics have questioned the value of mountaineering, asking what practical use it could possibly have. At first climbers justified the effort and risk of their sport by claiming to be doing it in the name of science. Later, in the nineteenth century, they forthrightly declared it a form of recreation. Sir Leslie Stephen, a noted spokesman for the sport, wrote an influential book about climbing in the Alps titled *The Playground of Europe*. In keeping with this view of its purpose, mountaineering has found practical justification as part of the tourism industry that now plays a major role in the economies of countries such as Switzerland and Austria. The playground that Stephen extolled is rapidly turning into the Coney Island of Europe. It has become increasingly difficult to find a place from which to see the Alps cleanly without the sight of a cable car or condominium to sully the view. Religious pilgrimage to mountain shrines in other parts of Europe has undergone a similar process of commercialization: guidebooks to sites such as Montserrat and Mont Saint Michel warn visitors not to be put off by the clamor of vendors hawking devotional items to busloads of pilgrims.

The purely recreational approach to mountains, making the peaks of Europe glorified amusement parks, diminishes our experience of them. As paradigms of perfection, redolent with histories of a sacred past, they have more to offer us than a good time. They hold out the promise of something higher, something we desperately need in the muddle of modern life: an inspiring vision of a more meaningful realm of existence in which we can find the freedom to be true to ourselves. Whether approached in the traditional way of a pilgrim or in the nontraditional manner of a climber, the mountains of Europe stand as reminders of another view of reality – a view that calls us to a truer, more spiritual awareness of what is best in ourselves and the world around us.

EIGHT

AFRICA

Facing the Heights

GLIMPSED THROUGH THE HAZE OF THE IMAGINATION, HIDDEN behind vast expanses of jungle, desert, and grassland, the mountains of Africa crystallize in rock – and traces of equatorial snow – the aura of mystery that imbues the continent with its special mystique. Just south of the Mediterranean, the Atlas Mountains rise in a great wall of folded ranges, barring the way to the empty wastes of the Sahara. Deep in the sands of the world's largest desert, undulating in waves of heat, stand the gaunt pinnacles of the Ahaggar and Tibesti massifs. Like most of the mountains of Africa, other than the Atlas and the Ruwenzori, they were formed by volcanic activity. Remnants of ancient lava flows sprawl over other parts of the continent, capping the serrated ranges of South Africa and covering the highlands of Ethiopia. Deadly gases saturate strangely colored lakes that fill craters of volcanoes in West and East Africa: when they bubble up and spill over in invisible floods of carbon dioxide, thousands die. In both form and substance, the varied mountains of the world's second largest continent express the energy of molten rock slowly roiling beneath the earth's crust. Visibly charged with the power of this subterranean energy, they awaken a profound sense of mystery and awe.

The highest peaks and greatest concentration of sacred mountains occur in East Africa. The forces that ripped open the Great Rift Valley uplifted the Ruwenzori, a mysterious range of alpine peaks covered with snow and hidden by mist. Elsewhere in the region of East Africa, the fracturing of the earth's crust has produced clusters of isolated volcanoes, such as the Virungas and Ol

Doinyo Lengai, the Mountain of God. The highest of these volcanic peaks, Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro, have played particularly important roles as sacred mountains. The Kikuyu, the largest and most influential tribe in Kenya, have long revered the summit of Mount Kenya as the principal abode of their god Ngai. The mountain possesses the distinction of being the only peak in the world to have a country named after it. The Chagga who live on the slopes of Kilimanjaro draw spiritual and material sustenance from the snows of its summit, the highest point on the continent. Just as the perfect cone of Fuji symbolizes Japan, so the great dome of Kilimanjaro has come to represent Africa in the eyes of the world.

Not far from Kilimanjaro, in northern Tanzania, lies Olduvai Gorge. There, preserved in beds of volcanic ash and sedimentary clay, anthropologists have evidence of some of the earliest known precursors of the human species – the primitive tools and skeletal remains of *homo habilis*, nearly two million years old. Cave paintings scattered throughout the continent suggest that mountains may have served as shrines and objects of veneration for the prehistoric peoples who evolved out of these proto humans. In the middle of the Sahara, the mysterious peaks of the Ahaggar and Tibesti massifs rise up like the black bones of a fossilized monster, struggling to emerge from the desert sands. Figures inscribed on cliffs that lie between these mountains depict in graceful detail giraffes and other animals that inhabited the region when it was covered with jungle and grassland. Similar paintings appear in caves and under overhanging rocks in the Drakensberg Range of South Africa and the Tsodilo Hills of Botswana.

The San, whose ancestors painted some of these works of art, venerate certain of the mountains in which they are found. The beliefs of these people, who hunt and gather as the earliest humans did, suggest how prehistoric tribes may have regarded sacred peaks, both in Africa and other parts of the world where similar cave paintings exist, such as the Lascaux Cave in southern France. One of their legends tells us that the highest peak in the Tsodilo Hills, called Mount Male, was once a man with two wives. Because he showed more affection for his second spouse, his first wife bashed him with a stick and moved away with their children. When the great god found out what had happened, he turned the man into a mountain and his wives and children into the smaller peaks and hills of the region. A crack running up the face of Mount Male marks the scar inflicted by the jealous wife's blow to her husband's head. Like the Indigenous people of Australia, the San of Botswana see mountains as the petrified forms of their primordial ancestors, a view that may have been widely shared by prehistoric peoples.[1]

The oldest clear-cut references to sacred mountains in Africa occur in European rather than African sources. The ancient Greeks looked to the mysterious continent for the far-off place where Zeus had sentenced Atlas to stand in endless anguish, supporting the enormous weight of the sky on his

head and shoulders. In the fifth century BCE the Greek historian Herodotus identified the titan of Homeric mythology with the Atlas Mountains of north Africa – a range of rocky peaks that runs through the countries of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, reaching an altitude of 13,671 feet. Rising above the straits of Gibraltar, where the Mediterranean empties into the Atlantic, this range lay for the ancient Greeks at the extreme limits of the world they dared to navigate and explore. In the *Metamorphoses*, his classic poem describing the transformations of men and gods, the poet Ovid recounts the myth the Romans used to explain the creation of the Atlas Mountains. After slaying Medusa, Perseus showed the titan the head of the Gorgon, which turned him to stone so that

> Atlas was all at once a mountain, beard
> And hair were forests and his arms and shoulders
> Were mountain ridges; what had been his head
> Was the peak of the mountain, and his bones were boulders.[2]

As the fossilized remains of a deity who held apart the earth and sky, the Atlas Mountains fulfilled one of the most important functions of a sacred peak: to stand as a pillar linking, yet separating, the various levels of the cosmos. Without such a pillar to give it form, the world would collapse on itself and return to the chaos from which it emerged.

Of the African mountains known to Europeans of classical antiquity, the ones that most excited their imagination were the elusive Mountains of the Moon – a range of fabled peaks that seemed to epitomize the primordial mystery of Africa itself. Around 500 BCE the Greek dramatist Aeschylus made a brief reference to "Egypt nurtured by the snows." Fifty years later Herodotus stated his belief that the Nile issued from the waters of a bottomless lake set between two peaks. Aristotle wrote that the river had its source in a "Silver Mountain." In the second century CE the Roman geographer Ptolemy identified this mountain as a range and called it the "Mountains of the Moon," a name that resonated with the haunting connotations of another world – the divine realm of a lunar god. There among peaks glistening with silver snow lay the legendary source of the sacred river of the ancient world. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the search for these mountains and the waters they concealed assumed the character of a religious quest.

A number of explorers risked their lives in arduous efforts to seek the solution to the outstanding problem of modern geography. In 1888, traveling over ground already covered by his predecessors, Henry Stanley became the first European to discover, almost by chance, a range of snow peaks that fit Ptolemy's description of the Mountains of the Moon – the Ruwenzori, situated on the border of the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. An almost perpetual cover of rain and mist had hidden it from the

gaze of earlier explorers. Looking toward them on a rare day when their snows emerged from the misted sky, he nearly mistook the mountains for a range of clouds:

> [W]hile looking to the south-east and meditating upon the events of the last month, my eyes were directed by a boy to a mountain said to be covered with salt, and I saw a peculiar-shaped cloud of a most beautiful silver color, which assumed the proportions and appearance of a vast mountain covered with snow. Following its form downward, I became struck with the deep blue-black color of its base, and wondered if it portended another tornado; then as the sight descended to the gap between the eastern and western plateaux I became for the first time conscious that what I gazed upon was not the image or semblance of a vast mountain, but the solid substance of a real one, with its summit covered with snow.[3]

The Mountains of the Moon retained the aura of mystery that had enveloped them for thousands of years. Expeditions that set out to study and climb the peaks found in their rainforest and shrouded tundra an uncanny world of monstrous plants that seemed to belong to a prehistoric age of the primordial past. The chronicler of the Duke of Abruzzi's scientific expedition, which made the first ascent of the highest summit, 16,795-foot Margherita, in 1906, described the eerie, almost supernatural impression that the unearthly landscape made on him and his comrades:

> The ground was carpeted with a deep layer of lycopodium and springy moss, and thickly dotted with big clumps of the papery flowers, pink, yellow and silver white, of the helichrysum or everlasting, above which rose the tall columnar stalks of the lobelia, like funeral torches, beside huge branching groups of the monster senecio. The impression produced was beyond words to describe; the spectacle was too weird, too improbable, too unlike all familiar images, and upon the whole brooded the same grave deathly silence.[4]

The quest for scientific knowledge had taken the Duke of Abruzzi and his companions into the mysterious realm of the sacred, hidden in the grey mist of the Ruwenzori.

Although the human race probably originated in East Africa, not far from the cloudy peaks of the Ruwenzori, the ancestors of most of the Africans now living in the region have come from other parts of the continent. A long, slow migration of Bantu-speaking tribes circled in from Central Africa, approaching the highlands of modern-day Kenya and Tanzania from the south and east. The Kikuyu, the largest of these tribes, reached the foot of Mount Kenya in the seventeenth century. About 100 years later Nilo-Hamites moved into the area from the region of the Nile River Valley to the north. The most war-like of

these newcomers, the Maasai, took control of the open grasslands lying beneath the forested mountains. Unlike the Kikuyu, who settled the land and cultivated crops, they roamed the plains, grazing herds of cattle. Sometime before the nineteenth century predominantly Bantu-speaking peoples with a sprinkling of Maasai gathered on the green slopes of Kilimanjaro to form the farming and trading clans of the Chagga tribe. Other Bantu-speakers and Nilo-Hamites displaced aboriginal inhabitants from mountain ranges such as the Virunga Mountains and the Ruwenzori.

The Virungas, the last remaining habitat of the imperiled mountain gorilla, form a range of eight volcanic peaks that stretch along the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. They include two dormant volcanoes whose divine power, still burning invisibly in the mist, attracts the spirits of the dead. According to Dian Fossey, the researcher who publicized the plight of the gorillas and was killed for her efforts to protect them from poachers, the Bahutu, the largest tribe in the region, believe that the souls of the good go after death to dwell forever on the summit of the highest peak, Karisimbi, 14,826 feet high. There, far above the somber jungle that shrouds its lower slopes, a soft ring of meadows and lakes, green and blue beneath a volcanic cone softened with a cover of white hail, provides a beautiful setting for a paradise of the dead. Rising over forests of thick bamboo, the nearby peak of Muhavura, 13,540 feet, serves as another heavenly resting place for the spirits of those whose lives have been pure. Its name means "He who shows the right way" – the way that leads to eternal happiness.[5]

To the south of the Virungas, in the dry savannah of northern Tanzania, rises a sacred mountain that plays a central role in the lives of the people who live within sight of its summit. The Maasai who wander the open country around its base call it Ol Doinyo Lengai, the "Mountain of God." An active volcano nearly 10,000 feet high, it looms over the surrounding plains, thrusting up a grey cone wrinkled with gullies and covered with slippery ash. When it erupts, it seems to draw its power, like thunder, from the sky itself. The Maasai regard it as the special abode of Engai, the one and only God, who dwells in the blue heights of heaven. They believe that he withdrew to the mountain peak after a hunter shot an arrow at him, leaving their world a place of famine and death. Although he no longer lives among them, his presence remains: he still hearkens to their prayers and sends blessings to relieve their sufferings. They offer sacrifices of lambs without spots to him upon his mountain in the sky, asking for cattle and children, the two things they treasure most. The men of the tribe still climb the volcano on mysterious missions to invoke his power.[6]

The Sonjo, a farming people who speak a Bantu language and share their territory with the pastoral Maasai, also revere Ol Doinyo Lengai. They call it Mogongo jo Mugwe, which means the "Mountain of God" in their language as well. The volcano occupies a prominent place in their lives: the silhouette of

its symmetric cone appears from all their villages. According to their beliefs, in the distant past a supernatural being named Khambegeu came to the Sonjo and created for them a golden age of peace and prosperity. After he died, he rose from the grave and flew up to the sky to become one with God. A deity who lives in the sun, he also dwells on the summit of Ol Doinyo Lengai. The Sonjo believe that he cares for their welfare and that when the world comes to an end and other peoples are destroyed, he will save those among them who have remained faithful to him.[7]

KILIMANJARO

Not far from the border with Kenya, northern Tanzania bulges up to form one of the most massive and isolated mountains in the world – Mount Kilimanjaro. Visible from more than 100 miles in every direction, rising nearly 17,000 feet above the surrounding plains, the great snow-tipped dome, the highest peak in Africa, spreads across the equatorial sky, white and cool above the dust and heat that envelop the lowlands. Its broad outline, polished to a smooth finish by the blurring effects of height and distance, soothes the eye and calms the mind.

Kilimanjaro actually consists of three widely separated volcanic peaks linked together by an elevated plateau. The immense blue mass of Kibo, 19,341 feet high, so dominates the view that most people identify it with the mountain itself. Fumaroles and a huge crater hidden in its summit attest to its relatively recent volcanic activity. The second highest peak, Mawenzi, set to the side, rises to 16,893 feet. It has a very different look from that of its serene companion: black pinnacles of crumbling rock give it a dark and angry appearance. They form the sharp and brittle remains of a huge explosion that shattered its crater thousands of years ago. The oldest and lowest peak, Shira, scarcely protrudes from the plateau, reaching an altitude of only 13,140 feet. With its three peaks and the climatic zones they traverse, from dry scrubland at its base through humid jungle to high altitude desert and arctic glaciers, Kilimanjaro forms a world complete in itself.

The people who inhabit this world, the Chagga, have a story that explains the disfigured appearance of Mawenzi. Long ago, before the coming of Christianity, when they were still active volcanoes, Kibo and Mawenzi were wives of the great god Ruwa. One day Mawenzi went to the house of Kibo to get embers to light her fire. She arrived just before mealtime, which meant according to Chagga custom that she had to stay and eat. Mawenzi was lazy and did not want to cook. So, after leaving, she came back, saying that she had tripped crossing a stream and had dropped the embers in the water. Since she had timed her return to arrive just in time for dinner, Kibo had to feed her again. Realizing that she was on to a good thing, Mawenzi came back for a third meal. This time Kibo had cooked just enough food to prepare a special

dinner for her husband. She flew into rage and beat Mawenzi with a wooden paddle she was using to pound bananas, giving her the battered look she has today. Some people say that Mawenzi is so ashamed of her scarred and ugly face that she usually hides herself in clouds so as not to be seen in public. According to others, Kibo faces away from Mawenzi out of disgust, so that all one can see is the back of her head – a smooth mountainside without any prominent features.[8]

The Chagga clans came to Kilimanjaro over the last few centuries, seeking streams to nourish their crops and forests to protect them from attacks of the Maasai. There on the lush slopes of the mountain, in an idyllic setting, perched above the heat and dust of the plains, they felt they had found an earthly paradise. Even today they refer to their homeland as *kari ko ruwa* – "God's backyard." People who live downslope, toward the grasslands with their harsh, dry climate, they regard as deprived, even cursed. A Chagga told me, "You are not a full human being if you don't come from Kilimanjaro. In fact, the higher up the mountain you live, the more fully human and blessed you are." The region above the inhabited zone they considered especially sacred: only men who had received the proper initiations were allowed to go there.[9]

A Chagga myth, unique in its conception of mountain building, describes the creation of Kibo, Mawenzi, and other peaks and hills of the region. Long ago, before any of these mountains had come into existence, a skeptic named Tone challenged Ruwa, the supreme god of the Chagga, to demonstrate his power by inflicting a famine on the world, which he did. In revenge for the suffering he had caused them, the people tried to kill Tone. He sought refuge with a kindly old man, who put him in charge of two cows named Tenu and Meru – the latter being the name of a prominent volcano not far from Kilimanjaro. He warned Tone that if he ever opened the door to their stall he would die. One day Tone left it open, and the cattle escaped. He chased after them, crying out, "Tenu, wait for me!" The cow called back, "Come here, I wait for you." When Tone approached her, she threw up a hill and kept going. Tone had to run over it. In this way she continued to lure him on, throwing up ever higher and higher hills, culminating in Mawenzi. Nearly dead from exhaustion, Tone staggered to the top and croaked out, "Tenu, Tenu, my friend, have pity, for I die." Tenu replied one last time, "Come quickly, I am merciful and wait for you." Then she tossed up Kibo, the highest peak, and galloped up its slopes with Tone following her. They disappeared into the crater, never to be seen again.[10]

Before European missionaries converted them to Christianity, the Chagga regarded Kibo as the divine embodiment of all that was exalted, eternal, and nourishing. They honored their chiefs by calling them "Kibo." They also used

the name of the mountain in expressions wishing each other the blessing of long life:

> May you endure like Kibo.
> As Kibo moves not, so may life not be removed from you.
> As Kibo ages not, so may you never be old.

Many of their customs reflected the high esteem in which they held the sacred mountain. On rising in the morning, the older men would stand outside their houses, facing the volcano, and spit toward the sky as a form of offering to Ruwa, their god. The Chagga regarded the side of the village oriented toward Kibo as the one of honor. There the men would assemble for feasts and councils. Whenever a person met a superior on the road, he would pay him respect by allowing him to pass on the side closest to Kibo. The Chagga buried their dead with their heads toward the mountain. After a year or two, they would remove the skeleton from its grave and place the skull in an ancestral grove, facing Kibo in silent communion with its forefathers. People today still dig up the bones of their dead and put them in ancestral groves. The power of the mountain has even influenced the practice of Christianity: most of the churches have their altars on the side closest to Kibo.[11]

Richard Reusch, a German missionary who did mission work around Kilimanjaro, reported a legend, current among Ethiopians of the region, that linked the peak to the seal of Solomon. According to the story they told him, the King of Israel and the Queen of Sheba had a son named Menelik, who succeeded his mother to become the ruler of Ethiopia. After conquering a number of other countries and establishing a great empire in East Africa, he started home and found himself crossing the high plateau between Kibo and Mawenzi. A great fatigue came over him, and filled with a yearning to die, he said farewell to his generals and climbed up to the summit of Kibo to vanish into its crater accompanied by slaves bearing his treasure. There, swathed in clouds and snow, he sleeps the eternal sleep of the hallowed dead. Someday, according to prophecy, a descendant of the ancient king will restore the Ethiopian empire to its former greatness. When the time comes for him to fulfill his destiny, he will climb to the summit of Kibo and find the seal of Solomon on the hand of Menelik. He will put the ring on his finger, and the wisdom of Solomon and the spirit of Menelik will fall upon him, and he will go out to conquer the nations of the world.[12]

Although Ethiopia lies to the north of Kilimanjaro, the legend has some basis in the national epic of that country. According to this ancient work of Coptic poetry, the *Kebra Nagast*, Solomon and Sheba had a son named Menelik who was supposed to have conquered a vast territory to the south of Ethiopia. He also obtained the seal from Solomon, although he later returned it to his father in Jerusalem. The rulers of Ethiopia believed themselves descended from the kings of Israel, and the grandfather of Hailie Selassie, the last emperor, who was deposed in 1974, took the name of Menelik II when he reunited the country in 1889. When

Reusch climbed Kilimanjaro in 1926, the Ethiopian Christians living in the region refused to believe he had actually reached the summit after they asked if he had seen the ancient king and his treasure there and he replied that he had not.

Converted to Christianity and involved in the pursuits of the modern world, the Chagga today have abandoned most of the beliefs and practices directed toward Kilimanjaro, and few of the younger generation are aware of the significance that the mountain once had in the lives of their people. I asked Willy Makundi, a Chagga finishing a doctorate in forestry and natural resources at the University of California at Berkeley, what he knew of the sacred aspects of Kibo. "I really don't know much about that," he replied. "There are stories that people tell, but it's all part of the past that hasn't been handed on to my generation. Since we went to Christian schools, we never had the opportunity to learn that kind of thing from the old people. In a way, we're a lost generation."

However, as we talked, he began to realize that many seemingly unimportant things in contemporary Chagga life that he had not thought about came from old beliefs and practices having to do with the sacred mountain. When they are about to leave on a journey, even young people with a modern upbringing spit in the direction of Kibo for good luck – a relic of the offering of saliva that their elders used to make every morning at dawn. Everyone in the Chagga country sleeps with his or her head toward the mountain. "I thought it was because of the slope of the land, but I guess there's more to it than that," Makundi observed. Thinking about that point, he noted that the Chagga always build their homes and shops on the side of their farm or plot of land closest to Kibo. His father wanted to set up a brewing club for the men in his village – a place where they could pay to distill their own liquor. Makundi's grandmother told him that he would have to build it on the upper end of the farm facing the mountain.

"My father thought that was the women's way of discouraging him from something they disapproved of because he would have to build the club right next to their house, where no one would want to have a brewery. So he built it on the lower part of the farm, away from Kibo. My grandmother said bad luck would come of it, and sure enough, in a few years people stopped coming and he went out of business.

"You know," he added, "Kibo is not a mountain."

Makundi explained that the Chagga language puts special words before place names indicating their relation to the rest of the sentence and what kinds of places they are – flat areas, spaces, or points of land. With mountains they use a word that we would translate as "mount." So a Chagga will say, "I go *to Mount* Meru." But in the case of Kibo, they use nothing. They simply say, "I go Kibo." As far as their language is concerned, Kibo is not a specific place, much less a mountain. When I asked Makundi if any other places were treated in the same way, the only ones he could think of were home and heaven – two places of particular sanctity in cultures throughout the world. Although no longer

Figure 12 Climbers approaching the summit of Kilimanjaro high above the clouds. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

conscious of the fact, through their language, the Chagga still set their sacred mountain apart from other, more mundane places.

The ascent of Kibo starts in jungle dripping with moisture and thick with mud. Higher up, the dense foliage gives way to an eerie landscape of giant groundsels with scaly leaves emerging like prehistoric creatures out of wind-blown mist. Above this intermediate zone, the clouds part to reveal a cold desert of sand impossibly bright beneath a wide-open sky. On our final ascent of the mountain, we left our camp at nearly 16,000 feet around midnight and climbed through the dark to reach the crater rim well before dawn. I sat shivering in the intense cold, waiting for the first rays of the sun to brush the ice walls of the summit glacier with smooth strokes of pink light. A couple of climbers appeared on the far rim, silhouetted black against the expanding dawn. As the sun rose, I looked down 10,000 feet to a thin layer of clouds so far below that they had the metallic silver glint I had only seen from airplanes flying higher than Everest itself. I had climbed many mountains much more difficult than Kilimanjaro, but never had I felt so high above the world.

MOUNT KENYA

Mount Kenya, the second highest peak in Africa, has a very different appearance and feel from Kilimanjaro. Whereas the sight of the smooth outline of the

higher mountain fills the mind with a quiet feeling of serenity, the first glimpse of the jagged silhouette of Kenya tends to startle the viewer with a sudden burst of excitement, piqued with fear. Left as the remnants of a volcanic core, its peaks shoot up like daggers of rock, stabbing the underbelly of the sky. The highest summit, Batian, reaches an altitude of 17,058 feet. The two other principal peaks, Nelion and Point Lenana, are 17,021 and 16,355 feet high. Clinging to ridge crests and plunging down precipices, glaciers of wind-polished snow hover in the mist or glisten in the sun, depending on the clouds that swirl about its heights. Situated some seventy miles northeast of Nairobi, the capital of the country, the mountain rises in magnificent isolation, a dazzling pinnacle of rock and ice that dominates the landscape of central Kenya.

The Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, with more than two million members, call it Kere-Nyaga, "the Mountain of Brightness," from which has come its modern name of Mount Kenya. They believe that their god, Ngai, the creator who dwells in the sky, chose the mountain as his principal resting place on earth. In their prayers and sacrifices those who still hold to the old ways address him as Mwene-Nyaga, "the Possessor of Brightness." In addition to Mount Kenya in the place of honor to the north, he has abodes of lesser importance on smaller mountains located in positions of symbolic significance to the east, south, and west. Traditional Kikuyu worship him beneath sacred trees that stand for these mountains and act as temples of their god, the supreme deity who gave them life as a people and sustains them to this day.

According to the story the Kikuyu tell of their origins, in the beginning, when Ngai created the earth and divided it among the peoples of the world, he took the first Kikuyu to the summit of Mount Kenya. From the heights of his holy resting place, he showed him the beauties of the land he was about to give him. Then he pointed to a grove of fig trees in the middle of the country below them and commanded the man, whose name was Kikuyu, to make his home and family there. When Kikuyu went down to the place Ngai had indicated, he found a wife waiting for him, and together they had nine daughters. Their descendants became the nine clans of the Kikuyu tribe, named for the primordial ancestor who had stood on the divine summit of Mount Kenya at the beginning of the world.

Before sending him down to the land he had given him, Ngai told the first Kikuyu that whenever he had need of assistance, he should make a sacrifice and raise his hands toward the sacred mountain. This act of ceremonially invoking the god of Mount Kenya became one of the most basic rituals of the Kikuyu religion. It occupied such a central place in their religious and secular life that when Jomo Kenyatta, the father of the modern nation of Kenya, wrote a book about his people, published in 1938, he titled it *Facing Mount Kenya*. Even

today, this book remains the best written source on traditional Kikuyu religion and society. Every event of any importance – consecrating a house, performing a marriage, holding a tribal council, settling a dispute – required the participants to face Mount Kenya first and invoke the blessings of Ngai.[13]

The mountain played an especially important role in initiation ceremonies. In rites of circumcision for children becoming adults, elders drew sacred symbols on the initiates' faces, throats, and stomachs with pieces of white chalk called "snow," brought down from the heights of Mount Kenya. The most important part of the ceremony announcing the engagement of a boy and girl involved the sacrifice of a fat sheep, whose blood would be sprinkled toward the sacred mountain. After his marriage a young man entered the third stage of manhood and underwent an initiation into eldership. During the ritual an elder would rise and face Mount Kenya; holding up a drinking horn filled with beer, he would beseech Ngai to grant the tribe peace, wisdom, and prosperity and to bless the new initiate and his family. Then he would give him a staff of office and a bundle of sacred leaves, indicating that he had passed beyond the stage of war and had become a man of peace, no longer a bearer of spear and shield.[14]

The most elaborate rituals directed toward Mount Kenya occurred in ceremonies asking for rain, the source of life. The Kikuyu would choose a lamb of a single color, usually red or black, and have two children lead it in a procession to a sacred tree symbolizing the mountain. Taking a calabash of beer in one hand, milk in the other, an elder would lift up his arms toward Mount Kenya and pray in a loud, clear voice, "Reverend Elder who lives on Kere-Nyaga. You who make mountains tremble and rivers flood; we offer to you this sacrifice that you may bring us rain." Then the procession would circle the tree seven times, sprinkling the milk and beer on the trunk and branches. On the eighth circuit they would sit down in a ring, place the lamb on its back with its head facing the mountain, and strangle it. After roasting the meat and feasting on it, they would make burnt offerings toward Mount Kenya. The Kikuyu performed this ceremony at the beginning of the growing season and whenever the rains were late in coming.[15]

Like the Chagga on Kilimanjaro, the Kikuyu have discarded much of their traditional culture. Many of them have converted to Christianity and live in the urban environment of Nairobi, one of the most modern cities in Africa. Today only a few of the older Kikuyu continue to practice the old ceremonies directed toward the sacred mountain. During a severe drought in 1984, some local farmers brought red and black lambs to sacrifice at the foot of Mount Kenya. The god of the mountain took a long time to respond to their entreaties, and one of the men lamented, "Years ago rain would come only ten minutes after my people sacrificed to Ngai on the mountain. Now all our requests are bounced." He blamed the situation on the young who no longer followed

the ways of their ancestors. With a worried look toward Mount Kenya, he added, "The mountain is still like a magnet to our eyes, but it is not helpful to us anymore. We are scared."[16]

During their struggles for independence from British rule in the 1950s, the Kikuyu warriors of the Mau Mau movement took refuge in the forests of Mount Kenya, where they felt protected by the god of their sacred mountain. One of their leaders, Kiboi Muriithi, described how he and his companions would face the peak and pray to Ngai to watch over them. On the eve of dangerous missions, they would offer sacrifices to the deity on the mountain, asking him to keep them safe and grant them success. Thirty years later, in the 1980s, Moses Muchugo, a veteran of the Mau Mau movement, still rose every morning before dawn to face Mount Kenya and thank Ngai for the protection granted him and his companions years before: "No warplanes' bombs could harm us, because we stayed near our god. Our god and our mountain were our only friends then."[17]

Followers of new religious movements that blend Christianity with the old Kikuyu religion have adopted the practice of facing Mount Kenya. Lifting their hands toward the sacred mountain, members of one of these movements, a sect called the People of God, fall into states of possession, shaking with the spirit of the Holy Ghost. Simulating the cries of lions and leopards, they become more than human and believe themselves able to communicate directly with Ngai, whom they view as one with the Christian deity. On eight nights between 1953 and 1984, a farmer deeply influenced by the new religious movements heard a voice telling him to arise and ascend Mount Kenya. Each time he obeyed and went up to the mountain wearing a white gown and carrying a Bible. There, scantily clad in the icy air of the heights, he prayed to his Kikuyu and Christian god. He described what he felt in the following words:

> I move up the mountain as if I am being carried, like lightning. I cannot feel the altitude. Everything Ngai tells me up on the mountain happens below. I take the messages to the government of Kenya, but they ignore me. Something very big will happen soon and everyone will understand what has been revealed to me.[18]

In 1978 two British climbers encountered another holy man inspired by his god, this one on top of the mountain. They had just completed the ascent of an extremely difficult route on Nelion, the second highest peak of Mount Kenya. There on the summit, they found an old African wrapped in a blanket, with plastic sandals on his feet. To their surprise, he informed them that he had just climbed by way of their route to pray for the welfare of mankind. They offered to help him down, but he declined their invitation, saying he had a few more days to spend on the summit. After descending the mountain, they told the Mount Kenya park warden about the holy man trapped on top of Nelion. The warden mounted a rescue effort, but even with the help of carabineers and

Figure 13 Batian and Nelion, the two highest peaks of Mount Kenya, with the route climbed by the African man in plastic sandals. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

pitons, his rangers had a difficult time starting up the imposing face. They were standing around below it when the holy man came nimbly scrambling down the rock in his plastic sandals. One of the rangers called out to him, "Can I help you, my brother?"

"I'm not your brother, and I don't need your help. I do this three times a year," the man shouted back and ran down the mountain, vanishing into the mist. The park warden, a climber himself, later called the holy man's exploit one of the most amazing ascents in the history of mountaineering: mountaineers regard the route he had climbed without any equipment as one of the most difficult in the world.[19]

A number of years later, I encountered one of the rangers involved in the attempted rescue. I had wanted to interview the holy man, but the ranger told me I was too late: the old man had become senile and could no longer communicate. At the time, I was coming down from the summit of Point Lenana, a much easier climb. We had camped the previous night beside a high lake perched on a rock shelf next to the sharp rim of a cliff dropping thousands of feet into a valley far below. We reached the top of Point Lenana shortly after dawn, and looking back down, I saw an amazing sight: intense beams of sunlight reflected off the shining surface of the lake to fan up like searchlights probing the sky. It was a vision of the meaning of the Kikuyu name of Mount Kenya and what had drawn the holy man to its sacred summit – the Mountain of Brightness.

Even more than Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya has cast a spell over European climbers, luring them to attempt its much more demanding ascent. Ludwig Krapf – a companion of Johannes Rebmann, the missionary who "discovered" Kilimanjaro – first sighted the mountain in 1849. His report of seeing snow on its summit, which he described as "two horns ... covered with a white substance," was also mocked in Europe. An Englishman by the name of Sir Halford Mackinder made the first ascent of Batian, the highest peak, in 1899. He named the three major peaks of Mount Kenya after M'batian, a prominent chief and medicine man of the Maasai, and his brother and son, Nelion and Lenana. Thirty years later in 1929, the British explorer and mountaineer Eric Shipton climbed Batian and made the first ascent of the much more difficult Nelion, 17,021 feet high. Overtaken by nightfall on his descent from the summit of Batian, Shipton had a strange experience:

> I felt very tired and the phantom moonlight, the shadowy forms of ridge and pinnacle, the wisps of silvered mist, the radiant expanse of the Lewis glacier plunging into soundless depths below induced a sense of exquisite fantasy. I experienced that curious feeling, not uncommon in such circumstances, that there was an additional member of the party – three of us instead of two.[20]

A traditional Kikuyu might have said that for a brief time Shipton experienced the presence of Ngai.

One of the most interesting ascents – or attempted ascents – of Mount Kenya took place during World War II. Three Italian prisoners of war in a nearby British camp escaped on a lark to climb the peak as a break from the boredom of prison life. They fashioned crampons and other climbing equipment from odd scraps of material and left a note saying they would be back. To the astonishment of the camp commandant, they returned as promised, having failed in their attempt to reach the summit. However, they had plenty of adventures avoiding wild animals in the jungle and struggling up difficult faces in bad weather with primitive equipment. One of the Italians, Felice Benuzzi, wrote a delightful book about their escapade titled *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*. The interlude of temporary freedom they found on the peak gave them a taste of the deeper and more permanent liberation sought by pilgrims and hermits on sacred mountains around the world. Years later I met his wife, Stefania Benuzzi, at a conference to protect Mount Olympos and other mountains in Greece. She told me that she and other female prisoners had been interred at a camp near Mombasa down on the coast. Because of the heat and discomfort there, they had been released a year before the men up in the cool highlands beneath Mount Kenya.

The writings of the Scottish explorer Joseph Thomson, who saw the mountain in 1873, reflect the kind of spiritual feelings that the dramatic sight of

Mount Kenya continues to inspire among people today. Having heard about the wonders of the mysterious peak, he developed such an obsession to see it that his journey took on the character of a religious pilgrimage. When he finally saw the object of his quest, he was, indeed, transported:

> The sun set in the western heavens, and sorrowfully we were about to turn away, when suddenly there was a break in the clouds far up in the sky, and the next moment a dazzling white pinnacle caught the last rays of the sun, and shone with a beauty, marvelous, spirit-like and divine, cut off, as it apparently was, by immeasurable distance from all connection with the gross earth. . . . At that moment I could almost feel that Kenia [Mount Kenya] was to me what the sacred stone of mecca is to the faithful who have wandered from distant lands, surmounting perils and hardship that they might but kiss or see the hallowed object, and then, if it were God's will, die.[21]

With the end of colonialism in the middle of the twentieth century, Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro became symbols of the spirit of independence infusing the new nations of Africa. When Tanganyika gained independence in 1961, its first prime minister – later president – Julius Nyerere proclaimed,

> We will light a candle on top of Mount Kilimanjaro which will shine beyond our borders, giving hope where there is despair, love where there is hate, and dignity where before there was only humiliation.

On the eve of the day the British colony of Kenya attained independence in 1963, five African climbers ascended Kibo and lit flares on the summit precisely at midnight, the moment of liberation, illuminating the mountain in a blaze of light and announcing to all the world the birth of the new nation. A plaque on the highest point, Uhuru or Freedom Peak, bears Nyerere's memorable words.[22]

Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro have also become focal points of tourism and recreation. Where their ancestors used to revere the heights of these mountains from a respectful distance, many of the local people now work as porters and guides, leading tourists and climbers up into sacred regions formerly permitted to only the initiated. Each year thousands of foreigners follow a well-established system of huts up to the top of Kilimanjaro to watch the sun rise over the plains of Africa. The East African Outward Bound School regularly takes its students up the mountain as part of their training. Mount Kenya, with its more difficult ridges and faces, attracts serious mountaineers from all over the world – along with numerous trekkers and sightseers. The governments of Tanzania and Kenya have set the two mountains aside as national parks, complete with rangers and regulations.[23]

The mountains of Africa have lost much of the sanctity they once possessed as living embodiments of divine power. Tribes that used to venerate them as

the actual abodes of deities and ancestral spirits have turned away to worship the gods of Christianity and modernization. Peaks like Kilimanjaro and Kenya have become places of pilgrimage for foreign climbers and tourists seeking the spiritual challenge and inspiration of the heights. And yet, although Africans no longer voice many of their old beliefs, the mountains remain for them an unspoken presence. Customs may die, as they have with the Chagga and Kilimanjaro; rituals may lose their power, as in the case of Mount Kenya and the Kikuyu; but the look, the quiet act of facing the mountain still remains. And in that silence, echoed in the wind and sky and rock, something speaks with greater eloquence than all the words of men and women. For, in the end, what speech or act can match the overwhelming presence and reality of the sacred itself?

NINE

NORTH AMERICA

The High and the Beautiful

From the glacier-sharpened spires of Alaska to the softly rounded ridges of Appalachia, the mountains of North America display a diversity of form and beauty that reflects the varied character and spirit of the continent and its people. Massive peaks hung with glaciers, looming over vast expanses of northern forest and arctic tundra, epitomize for many the ultimate ideal of wilderness in its wildest and most natural state. To the south snow-capped volcanoes of the Cascades present a vision of paradise, floating pure and cool among the clouds. Breaking free from the valleys around their feet to leap toward the open heights above, the rugged peaks of the Sierra Nevada express in sculpted rock a yearning for freedom and fulfillment. The endless ranges of the Rocky Mountains, rippling out toward the thin blue rim of the western sky, beckon the traveler with promises of a land of limitless opportunity, waiting beyond the horizon. Protruding from the desert like the fossilized bones of ancient dinosaurs, the buttes and mesas of the Southwest stand as austere reminders of a bedrock of primordial reality underlying the fragile accomplishments of modern civilization. Lining the eastern side of the continent like wrinkles on an old man's face, the ancient, well-worn ranges of the Appalachian Mountains preserve a reassuring sense of peace and stability in the midst of the turmoil and change of contemporary American life.

Many of the people who live in North America today are descended from foreign immigrants, who began coming to the continent from Europe in the sixteenth century. The attitudes of these immigrants and their descendants

toward North American mountains parallel those of Europeans toward the Alps. Early settlers and pioneers regarded them as obstacles blocking their paths, places of foreboding wilderness filled with unseen enemies lurking behind rocks and trees. The names of various mountains in the western part of North America, such as Devils Tower in Wyoming and Mount Diablo in California, reflect a view of the natural environment as a savage realm of demonic forces to be overcome in the process of civilizing the continent.

With the emergence of an appreciation of the European Alps in the eighteenth century and the gradual disappearance of the American frontier in the nineteenth, attitudes toward mountain ranges in North America changed. Writers and artists began to exult in the very wildness and irregularity of form that had made mountains so distasteful to earlier generations. Philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James extolled rugged, isolated summits as inspiring symbols of independence and self-reliance, qualities of the human spirit to be sought and cultivated. Well-known painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran used idyllic mountain scenes set in the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada to evoke visions of the West as an earthly paradise. The words of the patriotic hymn "America the Beautiful," composed by Katharine Lee Bates in 1893, captured this sentiment for the United States as a whole with its moving description of the nation as beautiful "for purple mountains' majesty."

Many who go to admire views of ranges like the Sierra Nevada and the Canadian Rockies are actually seeking the kind of spiritual nourishment and solace that pilgrims find in the shrines of saints and other divinities. John Muir, the naturalist whose writings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to shape American attitudes toward mountains and wilderness, declared that "no temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite." He felt that God could be found more easily on the open heights, beneath the bright blue sky, than in the cramped recesses of dark and somber churches. With the exception of a few cults centered on prominent peaks like Mount Shasta in California, most people from mainstream American culture who seek a sense of the sacred in mountains do so in nontraditional ways, eschewing the aid of religious rituals.[1]

Native Americans, on the other hand, have revered mountains in a traditional manner for countless centuries. Their traditions of mountain worship go back thousands of years to prehistoric shamanistic practices their ancestors brought across the Bering Straits from Siberia, perhaps as early as 40,000 BCE. Long before Europeans came to North America, American Indians regarded certain peaks as places of power to ascend on vision quests and to invoke in religious ceremonies. Myths and legends found throughout the continent attest to the great importance of mountains in Native American beliefs and rituals. Among certain tribes, including the Pueblo and the Navajo, they have played a role as central as

any peaks in the cultures of China or Japan. Unlike earlier views of sacred mountains in Europe that have mostly vanished, those in North America have remained very much alive, especially in the Southwest. In fact, the intensity with which some American Indians still revere their peaks makes the sentiments of sublimity experienced by many white Americans seem pale in comparison. For this reason – and because of the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures – this chapter will focus on Native American views of a few mountains, mostly in the western part of the continent where mountain ranges reach their greatest heights and where reverence for them retains its greatest vitality.[2]

ALASKA AND THE WEST COAST

Running down the west coast of the continent, from Alaska to California are the highest and most imposing mountains in North America. Many of them loom up from low altitudes, adding to the overwhelming impressions of height and grandeur that help to make them sacred in the eyes of their beholders. The loftiest, Denali, known formerly as Mount McKinley, rises higher above its base than does Mount Everest, presenting one of the most impressive mountain faces in the world, over 17,000 feet high. From the summit of Mount Saint Elias, 18,008 feet above sea level, glaciers flow down to the ocean itself. Farther to the south the solitary appearance of great volcanoes like Rainier and Shasta draws attention to their enormous cones of shining snow. Tilted up as a single block of granite, the eastern slope of the southern Sierra Nevada in California forms a great wall of rock and ice, its sharp crest poised 10,000 feet above the dusty floor of the Owens Valley.

As with peaks in other parts of the continent, these mountains have been sacred to a great variety of Indigenous peoples. In the far north, near Denali and Saint Elias, the inland Koyukon and the coastal Tlingit speak Athabaskan languages, reflecting a common ancestry near the place where prehistoric hunters first crossed over from Siberia. As the early ancestors of Native Americans moved south, past Mount Rainer and Mount Shasta, they branched out to form a number of different cultures. As a result, tribes such as the Puyallup, Yakama, and Karuk in Washington and Oregon speak languages belonging to separate language families. Before white settlers decimated their populations at the end of the nineteenth century, scores of distinct Native American cultures inhabited the valleys and mountains of California, imbuing features of the local landscape with a great diversity of sacred power and meaning.

Denali

Thrown up by a tremendous collision of tectonic plates, the huge mass of Denali overlooks the greatest fracture in the crust of the North American

continent. From the icy snows of its Arctic summit, enormous glaciers twist down its flanks to wind like fjords through the granite peaks of the Alaska Range. The great height and bulk of the mountain – at 20,310 feet the highest in North America – have led the Indigenous peoples of the region to give it various names, all reflecting a feeling of reverence inspired by its impressive size and appearance. The Koyukon living north of the mountain in the valleys of the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers call it Denali, the "High One." The tribes of the Cook Inlet to the south refer to it as Dhelay Ka'a, the "Big Mountain." The significance of these names becomes apparent in an observation made by an anthropologist who spent a year with the Koyukon in the mid-1970s:

> In the past (if not still today), it was considered disrespectful to talk about the size or majesty of a mountain while looking at it. A child doing this would be told, "Don't talk; your mouth is small." In other words, this was "talking big," disregarding the need to be humble before something so large as a mountain.[3]

Hunters of the northern forest, the Koyukon depend for their survival on an intimate relationship with features of the natural landscape. Among these features, the most important are rivers, along which they live and from which they derive their tribal identity. The importance of water in Koyukon life is reflected in an unusual flood myth that makes the highest peak in North America a wave of stone. Long ago in the distant time of the beginnings, the trickster deity Raven assumed the form of a young man. Having heard of a beautiful maiden living in a village across the water, he went in a canoe to ask her to marry him, but she refused. Another woman offered him her baby daughter. He took the child into his boat, and as he began to paddle away, the haughty girl came down to the water. To punish her for having rejected him, he made her sink into the mud and vanish. In revenge, the girl's mother set two bears to beat up waves to drown him. As a result of their efforts, the waters rose and inundated the world so that everyone in the village perished.

Raven used his magic powers to smooth a path through the waves heaving up before him. Gradually he tired, and overcome at last with fatigue, he cast his harpoon at a wave and fainted. When he awoke, he found that the breaker he had hit had turned to stone, forming a small mountain. Glancing off its crest, the harpoon had struck an even larger wave, which had become Denali, the "High One." The missile had ricocheted up from the summit of that peak, the highest of all, to stick in the sky, where it remains to this day, visible only to shamans with supernatural sight. Raven looked around, and there to his delight stood the baby girl, now grown to womanhood. He took her in his arms, and they repopulated the world.[4]

White people have treated the mountain with much less reverence. Tired of companions who were boring him with arguments for silver, a prospector

named the mountain after William McKinley, the American presidential candidate who in the election of 1896 favored retaining gold as the monetary standard. McKinley won and the name stuck. Fourteen years later, in response to a wager made in a saloon in Fairbanks, a group of prospectors nicknamed the "Sourdoughs" climbed the mountain in 1910, reaching its slightly lower northern summit, which they mistook for the highest point. Following the official first ascent in 1913, innumerable climbers have "conquered" the peak, most of them in the last sixty years. In 1917 the mountain became the nucleus of Mount McKinley National Park. In 1980, in a belated show of respect for Native Alaskan views of the peak, the United States Congress renamed the preserve Denali National Park. Because of the efforts of the Ohio Congressional Delegation to honor the president from their state, the official name of the mountain remained Mount McKinley until 2015, when the Obama administration officially designated the highest mountain in North America Denali – the "High One."

Mount Saint Elias

Mount Saint Elias, the second highest mountain in the United States and Canada, rises to an altitude of 18,008 feet on the border between the two countries, right where the Alaska Panhandle begins. In contrast with the naming of McKinley for Denali, the modern name of Saint Elias betrays a sensibility for the sacred nature of its object. Vitus Bering, the Danish navigator who discovered the straits separating the North American and Asian continents, named the mountain for the saint on whose feast day he first spied its white mass rising over the grey waters of the Gulf of Alaska, although some sources say that he spied land that day and the name was originally applied to Cape Saint Elias and only later transferred to the peak itself. The Yakutat Tlingit who live in the vicinity of Yakutat Bay on the southeastern coast of Alaska and for whom the mountain is sacred have two names for it: Yas'éit'aa Shaa, "The Mountain behind Icy Bay" and Shaa Tlein, "The Big Mountain."[5]

The great pyramid of Mount Saint Elias, soaring up from the ocean in one smooth sweep of snow and rock, can have a powerful effect on the observer – on the rare occasions when the mountain breaks free from the mist and cloud that normally envelop its flanks. In 1965, long before I knew anything about its significance as a sacred peak, I came to climb Saint Elias on a mountaineering expedition. Early one morning in the darkness before dawn, after a night hauling up loads through the Arctic twilight, I walked off alone to the edge of an enormous drop. A blue glow, smooth and clean, lit the sky to the north. Just in front of my boots, the ground fell away to a glacier 6,000 feet beneath my toes. Flanked by a row of little peaks, their summits far below me, it stretched

off straight and wide, a grey highway 100 miles long, to blur and vanish in the azure shadows of the distance. For a moment, alone on the mountain, I felt as though I were standing on the blue edge of infinity.

Surrounded by a sea of glaciers, Saint Elias looks as though it were emerging from the waters of a frozen flood. The Yakutat Tlingit believe, in fact, that a deluge did cover the world and that only the summits of Saint Elias and two other mountains remained above it. Some of them point to tales of skin robes found among rocks up on the mountain as evidence that their ancestors survived the flood by finding refuge high on the peaks. Others say that the great white peak acted as a signpost guiding their forbearers on their historical migrations down the Alaska coast from the mouth of the Copper River to their present homeland in Yakutat Bay. As one woman so beautifully put it, "When the migrators were coming to Yakutat across the ocean, offshore, they saw Mount Saint Elias ahead, looking like a seagull on the water."[6]

The mountain played such an important role in stories of their origins that one clan of Yakutat Tlingit made it their crest, or totem. According to one account, those of their ancestors who traveled along the coast by land were so happy at finding their new home that they danced down the slopes of Mount Saint Elias. In gratitude they built a special house, or lodge, named for the sacred mountain. On festive occasions, members of the Yakutat Tlingit known as the Mt. St. Elias Dancers parade through the streets and perform ceremonial dances in which they wear shirts stitched with designs representing the peak as a pyramid surrounded by clouds depicted as circles. A Tlingit song tells how Mount Saint Elias "opened the world" with sunshine, making the people happy.[7]

The mountain itself did not always share in this happiness. According to Yakutat Tlingit belief, Saint Elias was once the husband of Mount Fairweather, a prominent, but lesser, peak 100 miles away. The two had a rocky marriage, eventually shattered by bickering and fighting. After a particularly violent quarrel, they separated, and Saint Elias moved away to the west, taking a large number of retainers and slaves with him. Stretching out after him in a long line, they became the range of smaller mountains that links the two great peaks and marks the border between Alaska and the Yukon Territory of Canada. One peak, a slave belonging to both, acted as a go-between, continuing to carry messages between the estranged spouses. The children of the divorced couple remained with their mother, forming the mountains to the east of Fairweather.[8]

The Yakutat and other Tlingit tribes to the south believe that spirits inhabit the mountains and glaciers that frame the world in which they live. Their shamans go up into the forests, toward the high peaks, to obtain from them their supernatural powers. Ordinary people take special care to avoid offending the powerful spirits who dwell inside glaciers and occasionally come out,

looking like frost upon the ground. When the Tlingit have to travel near them, they put on their best clothes and address them with respect. They also smear black pitch over their faces to conceal their eyes: mountains and glaciers find the gaze of humans offensive. If a stranger on a mountaineering expedition has the bad manners to look at them directly without dark goggles, they hide themselves in clouds and cause bad weather.

Glaciers come in sexes, like people. Males tend to be more aggressive and bothersome than females. If someone tries to cook near a male glacier, the spirit will come out and cause trouble. It will not go away until its harried victim burns everything in the fire. Female glaciers, on the other hand, allow people to cook and eat their food in peace. They are usually retreating and have large medial moraines that look like the parted braids of a woman's hair. If provoked to anger, however, they can join with males to advance and destroy everything in their paths. In 1986 the Hubbard Glacier surged across a fjord, blocking a major river and threatening an ecological catastrophe. One of its tributaries, the Valerie Glacier, apparently triggered the event by starting to move at the amazing speed of 112 feet a day. The local Tlingit surmised that someone may have angered the glaciers. One person identified the Hubbard as a male glacier and the Valerie as a female. "And," he added, "females are known for their unpredictable behavior."[9]

Mount Rainier

Gracefully draped with the largest glaciers in the United States outside of Alaska, Mount Rainier, the highest peak in the Cascades, soars up in a majestic dome of blue white snow, its broad summit gleaming in the sky, 14,410 feet above the waters of Puget Sound. An enormous dormant volcano, unrivalled in height by any of its neighbors, the mountain dominates the landscape of Washington State south of Seattle. The sight of its massive, yet beautiful, form so moved one writer, John H. Williams, that in 1910 he published a book about the peak titled *The Mountain That Was "God."* The title caught on as an epithet for Rainier itself, leading some to mistake it for a translation of one of the native names of the volcano, Tahoma or Tacoma. Williams captured in one short phrase the powerful religious sentiments that the peak has awakened in numerous other writers, such as Theodore Winthrop, who wrote of his impressions on seeing Rainier in 1853:

> Only the thought of eternal peace arose from this, heaven-upbearing monument like incense, and, overflowing, filled the world with deep and holy calm . . . And, studying the light and majesty of Tacoma, there passed from it and entered into my being, to dwell there evermore by the side of many such, a thought and an image of solemn beauty, which

> I could thenceforth evoke whenever in the world I must have peace or die. For such emotion years of pilgrimage were worthily spent.[10]

Even today residents of Washington State refer to Mount Rainier as "*the* mountain," putting it in a special category set apart from all other mountains, no matter how high or impressive they may be. In 1963 some of the most proficient mountaineers in America were returning from a Harvard mountaineering expedition in which they had had made the first ascent of one of the highest and most difficult faces of Denali. When they stopped off to climb Mount Rainier, a much lower mountain, the park ranger told them they would have to hire a guide. "But we've just come back from climbing the Wickersham Wall on McKinley," they protested. "Doesn't matter – it's not *the* mountain," the ranger replied and refused to give them permission to go up it on their own.

The Native American tribes who shared the region before white settlers took over – Puyallup, Yakama, Nisqually, and others – also regarded the mountain with awe, believing that no one could climb it and survive the power of the spirits inhabiting its summit. On the occasion of its first ascent in 1870 by General Hazard Stevens and P. B. Van Trump, their Yakama guide, Sluiskin, pleaded with them not to go, saying,

> Your plan to climb Tacoma is all foolishness. No one can do it and live. A mighty chief dwells upon the summit in a lake of fire. He brooks no intruders . . . You make my heart sick when you talk of climbing Tacoma. You will perish if you try to climb Tacoma. You will perish and your people will blame me. Don't go! Don't go![11]

The great size and solitary splendor of Mount Rainier made it a focal point for Native American stories embodying the two themes of flood and family strife that we saw attached to prominent peaks in Alaska. According to one set of these myths, the mountain used to stand on the other side of Puget Sound, where she was the wife of a peak in the Olympic Mountains. One of a number of wives, she quarreled with the others and moved away in disgust, taking up residence on the far side of the water. Filled with anger, she swelled up to her present, enormous size. Some accounts say that the Great Changer punished her and her husband by changing them into the snow-capped peaks of Mount Rainier and Mount Olympus. Others assert that the mountains on the Olympic Peninsula became too crowded, forcing Rainier to move across the sound, where she grew so big that she turned into a monster who had to be subdued by Changer in the form of a fox. When he killed her, the blood that gushed from her sides turned into the rivers of water that flow from the mountain today.[12]

According to a myth based on the flood theme, long ago the Great Spirit dwelled on the summit of Tacoma. Angered by the beings he had created, he decided to get rid of them all, except for one good man and his family, along

with the animals who had not become evil. He told the man to shoot a series of arrows into a cloud floating over the mountain. The first one stuck into the cloud and the others into each other, forming a rope that hung down from the sky. Followed by his family and all the good animals left in the world, the man climbed up this rope. When they reached the top, they looked down to see the others scrambling up after him. The man shook the rope of arrows, and it broke, so that the bad animals and people fell back to earth. Then the Great Spirit made the rain to fall, causing a flood to cover the world and drown them all. When the waters reached the snow line on Tacoma, he commanded them to recede. The man and his family, accompanied by the good animals, lowered the rest of the rope and climbed down to the summit of Tacoma. As dry land emerged from the water, they walked down the mountain to repopulate the world. The myth adds that since that time Tacoma has been free of bad animals and snakes.[13]

As the dominant feature of the surrounding landscape, glistening with glaciers, Mount Rainier continues to soar on high as a sacred place for the tribes that live around it – the Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin Island, Muckleshoot, Yakama, and Cowlitz. The Nisqually call the great mountain that looms over their territory "Ta-co-bet," translated variously as "Where the Waters Begin" and "Nourishing Breasts." The Nisqually historian Cecilia Carpenter has written about the continuing importance of the sacred peak in the lives of her people:

> Elegant and majestic, the mountain still stands, filling the eastern sky above Nisqually country, keeping watch over the Indian dwelling places and fishing weirs, filling the river with life-sustaining water, and causing gentle rains to fall on the lands. Clothed in her robes of glistening white, Ta-co-bet, the mountain has kept faith with the traditional Nisqually Indian people whose descendants continue to offer up their songs of thankfulness, praise, and adoration.

Archeologists have identified caves and other sites on slopes of the mountain, just below the glaciers, that the ancestors of the Indigenous peoples have used for centuries. The Nisqually and members of neighboring tribes maintain ancient practices of going up to the highest meadows to gather berries and medicinal herbs.[14]

Mount Rainier has a strong presence not only for the American Indian tribes who revere it but for residents of the Pacific Northwest in general, including those living in major cities, such as Seattle and Tacoma – the latter city bearing one of its American Indian names. The mountain has become an icon for the entire region, a striking symbol with which people identify themselves and the place where they live. Sue Koeteeuw has given voice to this widely shared sense of identity with particularly evocative words that speak of the spirit of

Mount Rainier as being "the very soul" of the Pacific Northwest. Innumerable organizations, businesses, and local governments use the mountain in their names, logos, and publicity as a way to connect with their members, customers, and constituents. The rabbi of a congregation in Tacoma even formed a "Mountain Brachah Society" whose members recite a blessing on first seeing Mount Rainier on the rare days when it becomes visible. The sense of identity with the iconic mountain comes to the fore when the summit emerges from the mist and rain that conceal it much of the year and people drop whatever they are doing and look up to exclaim, "The Mountain is out!"[15]

Mount Shasta

The mountain in North America that arouses some of the greatest spiritual interest is Mount Shasta, the second highest peak in the Cascades. An enormous snow-capped volcano 14,163 feet high, it looms like a Himalayan giant over the hills and ranges of northern California, just south of the Oregon border. Unlike many other mountains, Shasta stands by itself, awesome in its isolation. Because of its location near the Pacific Ocean, frequent storms and strange clouds create eerie effects around its summit, making it seem charged with supernatural power. Somewhere far beneath its sealed crater, the clash of tectonic plates melts rock and makes it roil in preparation for some future eruption. Awed by its size and power, many people regard the mountain as a fountainhead of cosmic energy.

Mount Shasta has such an imposing appearance, rising more than 10,000 feet above its base, that it makes a profound impression on anyone who sees it, whether mystically inclined or not. Once, on a family trip driving back to California from Oregon, I pointed out the great white pyramid of shimmering snow to my son, David, not yet two years old. The sight so impressed him that a month later he produced as his first work of representational art, a drawing of the peak. For the next two years every mountain he saw, no matter what size or shape, whether a photograph or an actual view, elicited the same excited cry, "Look, Daddy, Mount Shasta!" Such responses help to give life to a mountain and make it a sacred place, a focal point of myth and legend.

Mount Shasta stands out as a sacred peak of particular power and significance for a number of Native American tribes in northern California and southern Oregon, including the Winnemem Wintu, the Shasta, the Pit River, the Modoc, the Karuk, and the Hupa. Over the centuries they have traditionally looked to it for healing, strength, wisdom, and guidance. The Winnemem Wintu call the mountain Bohem Puyuik and consider it the most sacred of their sacred places, the one that "has it all.' They believe that prayers made on its slopes have great power and efficacy. The Pit River, who know Shasta as Ako-Yet, revere the mountain as the abode of a powerful spirit who keeps the

universe in balance. Toward the end of his life, each year on the full moon of August, a Karuk medicine man named Charles Thom conducted a sweat ceremony of ritual purification at 7,000 feet on the slopes of the mountain. After following the white man's ways for many years, Thom felt himself called to Mount Shasta. Living within sight of the sacred peak during his last years, he looked to it for inspiration and meaning in his life and teaching.[16]

Joaquin Miller, a nineteenth-century author and poet, lived among the Modoc of northern California and recorded a myth they had about the creation of Mount Shasta and the origin of the human race. According to the story as he understood – and probably embellished – it, the Great Spirit formed the mountain from snow and ice that he pushed down through a hole he made in the sky. Stepping down from the clouds onto its summit, he created plants and trees, birds and animals, and appointed the grizzly bears masters over all. Then, in order to remain on earth and complete his work of creation, fashioning the land and sea, he hollowed out Mount Shasta in the form of a lodge and took up residence inside it. The fire and smoke that used to issue from the volcano came from the cozy fireplace he built in its center to warm himself and his family.

Once a great storm blew in from the ocean, threatening to topple Mount Shasta. The Great Spirit asked his youngest daughter to stick her arm out of the top of the mountain and signal the tempest to lessen its force. When out of curiosity she stuck out her head to see the ocean, the wind grabbed her by the hair and hurled her down the mountain, where a grizzly found her shivering in the snow. He took her back to his wife, who decided to rear the child along with her own brood of cubs. When she grew up, the mother bear had her marry her oldest son. The children of this couple, who resembled neither of their parents but shared some of their characteristics, were the first human beings. Up to this time, the bears walked on two legs, like people. However, when the Great Spirit discovered that a new race had been created without his authorization, he became angry with the grizzlies and ordered them down on their hands and knees. Ever since that time, bears have gone about on four legs, only getting up on two when they have to fight. The unauthorized children of the couple, the ancestors of the human race, the Great Spirit scattered throughout the world.[17]

According to another creation myth, which falls into a pattern of flood stories reaching from Alaska to California, Coyote, the wisest and wiliest of all the animals, angered an evil water spirit by shooting it with a bow and arrow. In retaliation the deity flooded the world so that only the summit of Mount Shasta protruded above the waves. Coyote escaped the rising water by running up to the top of the mountain, where he lit a fire to warm himself. Seeing him there, various animals swam over to seek refuge with him. After the flood subsided, they all came down from the summit to renew life on the earth below.[18]

Figure 14 The Winnemem Wintu spiritual teacher and doctor Florence Jones leads a ceremony next to Panther Springs on Mount Shasta. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

Before her passing in 2003, I attended a ceremony that Florence Jones, a noted Winnemem Wintu spiritual doctor and healer, conducted every August on Panther Meadow just below tree line high on the south side of the mountain. She felt that she drew her power to teach and heal from Mount Shasta itself. The ceremony took place next to a sacred spring, the most important site for her and a conduit into the spiritual heart of the mountain. Seated cross-legged surrounded by American Indians from various tribes holding up feathers, Florence fell into a trance and stretched her arms out toward the sky. It had been overcast, threatening rain, but at that moment the sun came out in a burst of brightness. She lowered her arms and the clouds returned – a sign of her connection to the spirit of the mountain.

Stories of strange phenomena – wavering lights, balls of fire, eerie sounds, flying saucers – have led many non-Indians to view Mount Shasta as a magnet of cosmic forces, a sacred center of psychic and spiritual power. In the summer of 1987, thousands converged on the mountain as part of the Harmonic Convergence, a worldwide effort to draw on such energies to initiate a new age of universal peace and harmony. Over the years, the mystical aura surrounding the peak has attracted numerous religious groups and spiritual seekers, a few of whom have not fully respected traditional American Indian ceremonies conducted at the sacred spring on Mount Shasta. The mountain has assumed importance for as many as 100 different sects, organizations, and centers, each with its own view and interpretation of Shasta's significance. These include, to

list only a few, the Brotherhood of the White Temple, the Radiant School of Seekers and Servers, Gathering of the Ways, the Association Sananda and Sanat Kumara, the Zen monastery of Shasta Abbey, the Rosicrucians, and the I AM Foundation.[19]

In 1978 an avalanche wiped out a major chairlift and forced the closure of the Shasta Ski Bowl, interpreted by some as a clear indication of the mountain's displeasure with desecration caused by the scarring of ugly ski runs. A proposal to build a new ski area threatened the meadow and spring sacred to Florence and members of other tribes living in the general vicinity. The American Indians joined forces with environmental organizations and local residents to fight the project, which had the approval of the US Forest Service. They should have been able to use the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, but they soon realized that the courts had difficulty dealing with sacred natural sites like the meadow and spring, rather than manmade structures like churches and synagogues. The opponents to the development argued instead that centuries of usage by various American Indian tribes made the meadow and spring important historical sites deserving of protection under the National Historic Preservation Act. In 1998, after fifteen years of litigation and protest, the Forest Service finally reversed its earlier approval and cancelled the proposed project.[20]

Sierra Nevada

From the coastal mountains of California south of Shasta, on a clear day in spring, one can look 100 miles across the Sacramento Valley to the luminous wall of the Sierra Nevada, a long white line gleaming above bands of purple forest and golden grass. In 1868 such a view from a pass not far from San Francisco moved the well-known naturalist John Muir to write his often-quoted words about this mountain range, the one he loved above all others:

> Then it seemed to me the Sierra should be called not the Nevada, or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light. And after ten years of wandering in the heart of it, rejoicing in its glorious floods of light, the white beams of the morning streaming through the passes, the noonday radiance on the crystal rocks, the flush of the alpenglow and the irised spray of countless waterfalls, it still seems above all others the Range of Light, the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain-chains I have ever seen.[21]

His writings make it clear that Muir was not speaking about an ordinary light, but of a divine radiance such as mystics see in visions of glory infusing the world around them and transforming it into a reflection of a higher, more perfect reality. In the same passage he says of the Sierra, "It seems to be not clothed

with light, but wholly composed of it, like the wall of some celestial city." And elsewhere he writes, making his meaning perfectly clear, "Never had I beheld a nobler atlas of mountains. A thousand pictures composed that one mountain countenance, glowing with the Holy Spirit of Light!"[22]

For Muir and many others who followed his lead the Sierra Nevada was a range of sacred mountains. Its peaks, valleys, forests, meadows, and glaciers were his church and his paradise, the shrines where he communed with nature and spoke with God – as spirit, truth, and beauty. He went so far as to say that the Sierra Nevada was to him as holy as Mount Sinai. The religious connotations of the form and name of Cathedral Peak, a magnificent spire of granite towering over Tuolumne Meadows, fascinated him: before making its first ascent in 1869, he wrote that he hoped to climb the mountain not to conquer it but "to say my prayers and hear the stone sermons." Yosemite Valley with its walls of glacier-sculpted rock he regarded as a temple more magnificent than any made by human hands. And whereas others might use such metaphors for literary effect, he really meant it. He even found in his sacred mountains the mystical experience of self-transcendence sought as the goal of many religious traditions:

> Brooding over some vast mountain landscape, or among the spiritual countenances of mountain flowers, our bodies disappear, our mortal coils come off without any shuffling, and we blend into the rest of Nature, utterly blind to the boundaries that measure human quantities into separate individuals.[23]

Indeed, in accounts like this one, Muir gave expression to the tenets of a philosophical tradition to which he felt he did belong – the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who believed in the existence of a spiritual reality underlying and unifying the world revealed by the physical senses. When Emerson visited him in Yosemite in 1871, Muir compared the old philosopher to a giant sequoia and later named a mountain after him.

A miraculous experience of deliverance from death on the heights of Mount Ritter in the Sierra Nevada gave Muir a special feeling for the peak as a divine embodiment of all that he revered in the range as a whole. He was creeping up a cliff close to the top when he ran out of holds and found himself clinging to the smooth rock, unable to move in any direction. He suddenly realized there was nothing he could do to keep from falling. He was going to die. At that moment something seemed to take over – "the other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian angel, call it what you will" – and with incredible power and precision his limbs carried him up the rest of the cliff. "Had I been borne aloft upon wings," he wrote, "my deliverance could not have been more complete." When he reached the top, emerging from the shadow of fear that

had darkened his mind, Mount Ritter and the world around it glowed in a special light:

> How truly glorious the landscape circled around this noble summit! – giant mountains, valleys innumerable, glaciers and meadows, rivers and lakes, with the wide blue sky bent tenderly over them all. But in my first hour of freedom from that terrible shadow, the sunlight in which I was laving [bathing] seemed all in all.[24]

A Paiute Indian who lived on the eastern slope of the range not far from Mount Ritter also had a miraculous experience of power and deliverance that gave him a feeling of intimate relationship with a particular mountain in the Sierra Nevada. One night in the mid-nineteenth century, Birch Mountain (Paokrung in Paiute), a 13,608-foot peak that rises in a dark triangle above the Owens Valley, appeared to Hoavadunaki in a dream and said to him, "You will always be well and strong. Nothing can hurt you and you will live to an old age." A short time later, walking alone across the desert, he fell ill, poisoned, he believed, by a shaman. With no one to help him, he crawled under a bush and collapsed on the verge of death. But then a thought came to him: Since my mountain has spoken and told me that I shall not die, why should I die here? Revived by this thought, he rose and went on to a village, where a medicine man completed the restoration of his health. Hoavadunaki attributed his deliverance to the power of Birch Mountain. For the rest of his life, he felt that it remained with him, helping him in times of need. Often when he had trouble hunting, he would ask the peak for aid, and without fail he would get a deer. As he put it, "My mountain is always good to me."[25]

Although they both felt a sense of intimate relationship with their mountains, Hoavadunaki and Muir related to them in very different ways. Hoavadunaki experienced Birch Mountain as a supernatural person who appeared to him in a dream and assumed the role of his guardian spirit, telling him that it would protect and aid him for the rest of his life. Muir had a much more abstract relationship with Mount Ritter. He viewed the mountain not as a divine being capable of personally acting on his behalf, but rather as a temple filled with the holy spirit of light. The power that carried him up the cliff and saved his life he attributed not to the peak itself, but to some other, more mysterious agency – "the other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian angel." Living in a culture that considered spirits a part of the natural order of things, Hoavadunaki had no difficulty accepting Birch Mountain as a sacred person who could reach out to help him. Given his religious and scientific background, which emphasized monotheism and discouraged anthropomorphic views of physical objects, Muir saw Mount Ritter as the divine expression of something more abstract – Nature, Beauty, or God.

THE MONTANE WEST

East of the Sierra Nevada, across the deserts of the Great Basin, rise the rugged peaks and ridges of the Rocky Mountains, the longest and widest range in North America, stretching from Canada in the north to Mexico in the south. Seen from the Great Plains on their eastern side, they appear as an enormous wall blocking the western horizon. Here and there a peak rises above this wall, like a turret on a fort or castle: the granite mass of Pikes Peak in Colorado, the alpine spires of the Tetons and Wind Rivers in Wyoming, the layered faces of the Rockies above Banff in Alberta. The striking shape of Chief Mountain (Ninaistakis), a huge cleaver-shaped blade of rock in Montana, is particularly sacred to the Blackfoot Confederacy, while Ute Mountain in southern Colorado, with its distinctive profile resembling a sleeping chief, has special significance for members of the Ute Nation. Just to the east of the Rockies, emerging as an upwelling of rock, like an island in a sea of grass, stand the granite peaks and volcanic buttes of the Black Hills of South Dakota, culminating in Black Elk Peak, revered as the abode of thunder beings by the Lakota.

Many of the Native Americans who roamed the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains until forced onto reservations migrated there from the woodlands of Minnesota and the Ohio Valley to the east. With the help of horses, introduced by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the Dakota and Lakota tribes of the Sioux moved onto the Great Plains around 1700. As nomadic hunters and warriors, they cultivated visionary experiences to help them in fighting their enemies and hunting their prey, in particular, the vast herds of buffalo that once speckled the land. Along with other tribes of the Plains, such as the Cheyenne and the Crow, they climbed – and continue to climb – sacred hills and peaks on vision quests, seeking the kind of power and protection that Hoavadunaki obtained from his dream of Birch Mountain. Most of these tribes make such a quest an obligatory rite of passage leading to adulthood and the attainment of a full and responsible life.

After receiving religious instruction from a medicine man and ritually purifying himself in the sacred steam of a sweat lodge, a youth is taken up to a high place and left there to pray and fast alone, exposed to wind, rain, sun, and stars. Awed by the wild grandeur of his surroundings, his senses quivering with anticipation and fear, he gradually opens himself to the mysterious forces of the world around him. A rustling in the grass, the sudden flight of a bird, the sparkle of a star, any of these can trigger a vision – or induce a dream. He may find himself flying up through the clouds to a rendezvous in the sky, or a sacred being may appear directly before him, sometimes in the shape of an animal, sometimes in the form of a man.

What he sees and hears in the realm of vision gives him the power and guidance he needs to live in the world of everyday life. Often, but not always,

he gets a guardian spirit – the sacred being or animal that appeared to him – to instruct and protect him after his quest. In some cases the power and guidance may come directly from the visionary experience itself, or the memory of it. Crazy Horse, a famous Lakota war chief, got his name from a vision in which he saw himself riding a horse that was dancing like a shadow in the shimmering world of the spirits. Whenever he rode into battle, he had only to remember this vision, and no bullet or arrow could touch him – and none ever did. After a youth comes down from his quest, a medicine man helps him interpret and understand what he has experienced. To bring the power of his vision into the world, he may have to sing the songs he had heard and act out the things he had seen before the members of his tribe. He will have the rest of his life to comprehend and assimilate the full significance of his most important youthful experience.[26]

Although vision quests may take place in forests or other places, depending on the nature of the local terrain, the tops of hills and mountains are the sites that most Plains Indians prefer. The awesome view of a vast horizon circling around him dwarfs a person to insignificance, putting him into a suitably humble and receptive frame of mind. Standing on a high and lonely summit, exposed to the power of the elements, he can expose himself to the mercy of the spirits, calling on them to take pity upon him and grant him a vision. The Sioux word for a vision quest means, in fact, "crying for a vision." The harshness of the environment on the summit of a mountain also contributes to the ordeal of self-inflicted suffering that some tribes make an essential part of the undertaking. To demonstrate their commitment and willingness to sacrifice everything for a vision, the Crow in the past would cut out strips of their flesh and chop off joints of their fingers.

The Crow rank sites for vision quests in order of increasing altitude. The higher the site the greater the severity and solitude of the quest and the more powerful the vision it can produce. The easiest and least significant places are down in sheltered valleys close to human habitation; the most difficult and sacred lie high on the windswept peaks of the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming and Montana. Two Leggings, a warrior chief obsessed with the quest for personal power and status, deliberately chose the top of an imposing mountain that most people feared as the home of the terrifying Thunderbird. "We decided to fast there because we wanted a stronger medicine," he told his biographer. On the fourth day of his vigil, just before dawn, as he slipped into a dream, a huge man appeared on the horizon with a hawk perched on his head. He told him that the name of the bird was "The Bird Above All the Mountains" and that in the future he, Two Leggings, would be known all over the earth. The man also showed him a vision of four small sweat lodges and instructed him to build copies of them whenever he wished to go on the warpath.[27]

The Stoney or Assiniboine, a Siouan people living in Canada near Calgary, go on vision quests on peaks in the Rocky Mountains above Banff and Lake Louise. Like the Sioux tribes to the south, who also maintain the practice, they purify themselves in sweat lodges and smoke peace pipes, offering prayers to the four directions. Then they go off alone into some of the highest and most beautiful mountains in North America to seek power and guidance in a vision, dream, or sign of nature, such as the sight of an animal acting in an unusual manner. The importance of the Canadian Rockies and the feelings of reverence they inspire are revealed in the words of a Stoney leader, Chief John Snow, who wrote a book about his people titled *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places*:

> These mountains are our temples, our sanctuaries, and our resting places. They are a place of hope, a place of vision, a very special and holy place where the Great Spirit speaks with us. Therefore, these mountains are our sacred places.[28]

Bear Butte (Noahavose)

Just to the east of the Black Hills rises Bear Butte, sacred to both the Lakota and the Cheyenne. A great monolith of volcanic rock streaked with gullies and speckled with pines, it stands in impressive isolation, surrounded by rolling prairie, visible from miles away. The Lakota named it Mato Paha, "Bear Mountain." They would climb it on vision quests, leaving stones in the branches of trees to mark their efforts. Crazy Horse was said to have obtained remarkable powers from one such quest that he undertook on Bear Butte. A Lakota legend holds that Custer died at the hands of Crazy Horse and his warriors because he had offended the spirit of the mountain by climbing it just before the battle of Little Big Horn.[29]

Bear Butte has particular importance for the Cheyenne. They regard it as the most sacred place on earth, the holy source of the spiritual power that has nourished and sustained them as a people. They call it Noahavose, the "Good Mountain." According to their accounts of their history, many generations ago, Sweet Medicine, their greatest leader and prophet, went up to Bear Butte with his wife and found a cave inside the mountain. There they met Maheo, the Great Father and Creator of All. He gave them four commandments and four sacred arrows to take back to the Cheyenne. After four years of spiritual instruction inside the cave, they emerged from the mountain and returned to their people. Through the sacred arrows Sweet Medicine and his wife brought down from Bear Butte, the blessings of Maheo flowed into the Cheyenne. Two of these arrows gave them power over buffalo, the other two over men, supplying them with nourishment and protecting them from their enemies.

Their greatest disaster as a people occurred around 1830 when Pawnee warriors stole the sacred objects in a raid. Eventually the Cheyenne recovered the four arrows, but only after they had suffered defeat and incredible hardship at the hands of other Native Americans and the white men who followed them.

Before passing on, Sweet Medicine appointed a successor to keep the sacred arrows safe in his possession. In each generation the person entrusted with them has been regarded as the greatest holy man in the tribe. In 1945 the keeper of the arrows took them back to Bear Butte to recharge them with the power of the sacred mountain. Since that time groups of Cheyenne have gone to the peak on vision quests to fast and pray for peace whenever the need for it has arisen – at the end of World War II, in the Korean War, and during the fighting in Vietnam. Like their ancestors in the past, they have offered themselves up in suffering for the benefit of their people. After days and nights of torment, frozen by the wind and roasted in the sun, tortured by insects and distracted with doubts, they have seen something in the dim light of dawn that gives them the hope and assurance that a power will emerge from the mountain to renew the world and flood it with life.[30]

Devils Tower (Mato Tipila)

The most dramatic natural feature in the region of the Black Hills is by far Devils Tower. A frozen plug of molten magma extruded from deep within the earth and exposed to millions of years of erosion, it shoots straight up more than 1,000 feet above the surrounding landscape like a huge watchtower providing a perch for a lookout to scan the horizon for distant smoke signals or the dust cloud of approaching horsemen. The vertical grooves between the columns of rock lining its rounded sides give Devils Tower the appearance of an enormous petrified tree trunk scarred by the claws of a mammoth bear. The Lakota, the tribe with some of the closest cultural and spiritual connections to the impressive landmark, call it, accordingly, Mato Tipila or "Bear Lodge," and other tribes who also hold it sacred, including the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Crow, have given it names with similar meanings such as "Bear Peak," Bear's Tipi," and "Bear's Lair." Plains Indians have argued, unsuccessfully, to change the name "Devils Tower," which they regard as offensive and disrespectful, back to "Bear Lodge,' its original designation in government documents of the nineteenth century.[31]

Many of the stories or sacred narratives from various tribes revolve around the same theme: people chased by a huge bear or bears are saved when the ground they stand on rises as a rock tower into the sky, leaving their pursuer(s) to claw its sides in vain efforts to catch them. In one story seven little girls run from a pack of bears and jump onto a low rock. Hiding their faces from approaching death, they call out, "Rock take pity on us, rock save us!" The

rock surges up, leaving the bears behind to scrabble up its sides and fall down, buried beneath rubble at its foot. The seven girls soar ever higher to become the stars of the Pleiades or Seven Sisters, visible in winter over the summit of the tower. In some creation stories a falling bear lands some distance away and turns into Bear Butte, the sacred mountain of the Cheyenne. Reinforcing the connection between the two mountains, after bringing the sacred arrows down to the Cheyenne people from Bear Butte, Sweetwater died and found his final resting place at Devils Tower.[32]

The smoothly chiseled grooves and columns that look like the claw marks of a bear present a myriad of challenging routes that make the great rock tower extremely attractive to climbers. The Indians, however, view climbing as a desecration of their sacred site, especially in June, around the summer solstice. At that spiritually charged time, the most important part of the year, members of different tribes gather at the base of Bear Lodge to perform various ceremonies and rituals, including the Sun Dance, sweat lodges, prayer offerings, and vision quests. The impacts of climbers with their snaking ropes, shouted commands, and clanking hardware interfere with the atmosphere needed for the performance of these sacred practices. After two years of consultation, park staff at Devils Tower National Monument came up with a Climbing Management Plan that addressed the tribes' concerns by calling for a voluntary ban on climbing during the ceremonial month of June. Most climbers respected the closure, but some local guides objected, arguing that it illegally restricted their freedom to practice their religion of climbing. After a series of appeals, the Supreme Court sided with the park in 2000. In the meantime, following implementation of a slightly modified plan in 1995, the number of climbers each June dropped precipitously, but by 2018 it was rising again, despite appeals from climbing organizations to respect the sacredness of the natural monument and the religious practices of the American Indians.[33]

THE SOUTHWEST

Today Native American beliefs and practices devoted to sacred mountains retain their greatest vitality in the desert regions of the southwestern United States – Arizona, New Mexico, and southern Utah and Colorado. The spacious views and incredible clarity of the air cause distant peaks to stand out with a sharpness of outline that gives them a supernatural appearance. The tribes living within sight of them, such as the Navajo, Hopi, and Rio Grande Pueblos, have had the most success in preserving traditional ways of life that encourage the veneration of mountains. Unlike their neighbors in the plains to the north, however, they do not climb their peaks to cry for visions; they go up them, instead, to perform rituals and gather substances for ceremonial and medicinal

purposes. As one Hopi put it to me, "We go to the mountains to pray quietly." Sometimes in the course of a pilgrimage to the San Francisco Peaks, a ring of summits left as the shattered remnants of an ancient volcano in northern Arizona, the Hopi will see the *katsina* spirits who dwell on the sacred massif, but rather than prize such a vision, they regard it as a great misfortune. *Katsinas* only reveal themselves to those who doubt their existence: if a person sees one, it indicates that something bad will happen to that person as punishment for his or her lack of faith.

The oldest inhabitants of the Southwest, the Pueblo tribes, are descended from the Anasazi, an ancient culture that left impressive ruins throughout the region, some of them dating back to as early as 900 CE. Present-day Pueblos such as the Hopi of Arizona and the Tewa of New Mexico have inherited highly developed ceremonial religions based on the practice of agriculture. They live concentrated together in compact villages, centered around ritual structures called *kivas*. The open spaces of desert and mountains that surround them are inhabited by the Navajo and Apache, nomadic tribes that wandered into the Southwest from Canada sometime after 1300 CE. Speaking Athabaskan languages related to those of the Koyukon and Tlingit in Alaska, they follow a different way of life from the Pueblos, herding sheep and cattle and living in isolated communities.

For most of these Native Americans, mountains serve as cosmic pillars defining the limits of the world in which they live. Gazing out from the centers of their villages, each of the Tewa Pueblos of the Rio Grande valley near Albuquerque has singled out four peaks spaced around the horizon to mark the boundaries of its territory, such as Canjilón to the north, Tsikomo to the west, Sandia Crest to the south, and Truchas to the east. In their system of beliefs, these sacred mountains support the sky and divide the earth into quarters, conferring order and stability on the land that lies between them. On their summits dwell the deities who guided the ancestors of the Tewa people up from the underworld into the light of the sun. Altars of stone laid out in the pattern of keyholes mark the sites of earth navels that lead down into the supernatural realm of the gods hidden beneath the ground. When a person dies, he or she goes to the top of the mountains to return to the underworld from which his or her ancestors came. Each peak is associated with a color corresponding to the direction in which it lies: blue or green for north, yellow for west, red for south, and white for east.[34]

Other tribes in the Southwest have similar sets of mountains surrounding their territories, some of them overlapping with each other. Because it rises to the north of one tribe and to the west of the other, Mount Taylor, for example, is the northern mountain for the Acoma Pueblo and the western one for the Laguna Pueblo. The Apache and Navajo adopted this scheme of four sacred peaks from the Pueblos. The four *ga'an*, or mountain spirits, play a particularly

important role in the ceremonial life of the Apache. Male dancers wearing masks and waving sticks emblazoned with lightning bolts impersonate these deities in the coming of age ceremony of an Apache girl. They protect her during the ritual and assure her of well-being in her future life as a woman. According to Apache belief, when the world was created, the *ga'an* stabilized it at the points of the four directions. After living for a while among humans, they retired to four sacred mountains, where they dwell as divine protectors of the Apache people, giving them power and wisdom and sustaining them in times of need. Associated with the colors of the four directions, they represent the principles of order and balance on which the Apache world depends.

The Four Sacred Mountains of the Navajo

The Navajo, the largest tribe in the United States, have expanded the scheme of four mountains to cover an enormous area, extending from the San Francisco Peaks of Arizona in the west to the Sangre de Cristo Range of Colorado and New Mexico to the east. According to various versions of their creation myth, when First Man and First Woman emerged from a hole in the earth, they brought with them the soil of the sacred peaks that had given light to the worlds lying beneath ours. With this soil they fashioned the sacred mountains of the four directions, along with two or three others, depending on the version of the myth. One account describes the creation of the western mountain, Dook'o'ooslíid or the San Francisco Peaks, in the following way:

> The mountain of the west, they fastened to the earth with a sunbeam. They adorned it with abalone shell, with black clouds, he-rain, yellow corn, and all sorts of wild animals. They placed a dish of abalone shell on the top and laid in these two eggs of the Yellow Warbler, covering them with sacred buckskins. Over all, they spread a blanket of yellow evening light, and they sent White Corn Boy and Yellow Corn Girl to dwell there.[35]

First Man and First Woman created the mountains of the other three directions in a similar manner, fastening them to the earth with lightning, a flint knife, and a rainbow and spreading over them coverings of white dawn, blue sky, and darkness. Sisnaajiní, which some identify with Blanca Peak in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, they placed in the east; Tsoodzil or Mount Taylor in the south; and Dibé Nitsaa, which seems to be Mount Hesperus in the La Plata Range of southern Colorado, they put in the north. Each one they adorned with its own distinctive jewel, rain, plants, animals, and birds. Most importantly First Man and First Woman dispatched to the mountains the holy persons that give them life and make them sacred.

Each mountain has its inner form, a deity or spiritual essence in human shape, who acts as its soul or spirit, imbuing it with a power and intelligence that makes the peak itself a supernatural being. One Navajo with whom I spoke used an analogy of an instrument and its music to describe the relationship between the mountains and their in-dwelling deities: "If you ask a person where music is in a violin and he takes it apart, he will find nothing. In the same way, if we excavate and take apart a sacred mountain, we will also find nothing. But with belief we can find the holy person and his power in the mountain." One needs to learn how to "play" the mountain to experience its sacredness.[36]

The inner forms of the sacred mountains even partake of the nature of music itself: they come to life in songs sung by medicine men as they invoke their powers in rituals of healing and blessing. In Blessingway, one of the most important of these ceremonies, the inner form of the San Francisco Peaks sings this song of exultation as he climbs the mountain and takes his place on its summit:

> To the summit of the San Francisco Peaks I have ascended, ascended
> Now to the summit of chief mountain I have ascended, ascended
> To an abalone footprint figure I have ascended.
> . . . . . .
> Now I am long life, now happiness as I have ascended, ascended.
> Before me it is blessed as I have ascended, behind me it is blessed as I ascended,
> I have ascended, *o ye*.[37]

The song expresses not only the power of the sacred inner form, but also the feelings of the Navajo people for the sacred mountain and what it means to them.

The mountains arranged and inhabited by spiritual beings enclose and protect the sacred homeland of the Diné, the People, as the Navajo call themselves. "In the midst of these four Sacred Mountains that were placed, there we live. With that, we who are the People are the heart of the world." Within the boundaries established by their sacred peaks, the Navajo feel at home, safe and secure. They view the mountains of the four directions as the four crossed beams of a fork-sticked hogan, their oldest kind of traditional dwelling – a tipi-shaped structure covered with mud. The remaining two, or three, peaks form the chimney and entrance of the house, whose opening faces east, toward the dawn. In this way the vast expanse of their land, with its stark buttes and deserts exposed to the icy winds of the open sky, takes on the more inviting and intimate quality of a home made cozy by a cheerful fire.[38]

Since the hogan defines the sacred space par excellence in Navajo culture, the correspondence between mountains and beams is more than an intellectual construct. It has a visceral effect. Like a city dweller leaving the safety of his or her apartment for the dangerous realm of streets at night, traditional Navajo feel

anxious when they go outside the peaks that enclose the sanctity of their home. There lies a chaotic world of evil forces that may spring forth to attack them at any moment. On their return they have to go through rites of purification to drive out evil influences and restore them to a sacred condition. Even a modern Navajo woman like Theresa Boone, who works as a nurse in a Flagstaff hospital, feels a quiver in her stomach when she goes on trips to cities outside the boundaries of the sacred mountains. "When I come back and see the San Francisco Peaks, I feel at home, safe and protected," she says.

The Navajo also view the mountains as people and relatives for whom they have a deep personal affection. According to one man, "These mountains are our father and mother. We came from them; we depend upon them. Between the large mountains are small ones which we made ourselves. Each mountain is a person. The water courses are their veins and arteries. The water in them is their life as our blood is to our bodies." The trees and grass growing on the slopes of a mountain are the clothing covering its body. Some Navajo regard the San Francisco Peaks as a woman seated with her drawn up knees represented by two ridges enclosing a basin that opens out to the east. From that basin, as from the womb of a mother, issue her children – a line of small volcanic hills and cones running out toward the Hopi Mesas.[39]

The four mountains play a major role in the chantways – intricate ceremonies of healing and blessing that form the soul of the Navajo religion. As markers defining the boundaries of the world, they establish the setting for the sacred events of the mythic past narrated and sung in the course of the rituals. The medicine men, called singers, who perform these ceremonies, usually for the benefit of a sick person, draw paintings of sand – or pollen and other substances – on the ground that represent the mountains with abstract symbols such as circles and squares of different colors. Occasionally they depict the peaks in the form of little hogans, arranged at the four points of the compass. The mountains provide the sense of order needed to restore the spiritual harmony and balance that a person requires for physical health and well-being. They appear with the greatest frequency in the songs of Blessingway, the ceremony that confers the fundamental blessings and happiness from which all the other chantways derive their power.

An object essential to most of these ceremonies is a medicine bundle with pinches of soil from each of the sacred mountains. With appropriate song and ritual, the singers travel to the peaks to gather the earth and place it in leather pouches, which they wrap, together with jewels and other objects, in a buckskin hide. During the ceremonies they hold the bundles in their hands or place them beside the paintings drawn on the ground. According to the mythology of Blessingway, these bundles symbolize the primordial bundle that First Man used to create the inner forms of natural phenomena, culminating in those of the earth itself – hence their importance in the ceremony today. Every

twelve years the singers are supposed to return to the peaks from which they collected the soil and gaze at the summits above them in order to renew the power of their songs. Individuals keep mountain earth bundles in their homes for protection, prosperity, happiness, and long life.

Medicine men also go to the sacred mountains to gather medicinal herbs. Before traveling to a mountain like the San Francisco Peaks, they purify themselves with ritual sweat baths, making their journey a pilgrimage. On reaching their destination, they stand before a plant and make offerings to its inner form, reciting the myth that tells of its origin. Then, to avoid injuring the one they have just addressed, they pick another herb. The inner form, the life and soul of the plant, gives it its power to heal, making the medicine that comes from it more than a concoction of dead leaves and twigs.

In addition to the four that enclose their land, the Navajo hold sacred a number of other mountains. The two that First Man and Woman created along with the peaks of the four directions, are neither as high, nor, some say, as important. Gobernador Knob, the mountain of the center, located in New Mexico, was the birthplace of Changing Woman, a major deity who embodies the principles of renewal and restoration on which the world depends for its continued existence. She grew up on the nearby summit of Huerfano Mesa, where she had her sacred hogan. Unlike the peaks of the four directions, which reach up to 14,000 feet in altitude, neither mountain rises more than 8,000 feet above sea level. However, they have an important place in ceremonies as sites of divine origin and markers of the sacred center.

North of the San Francisco Peaks, not far from the Grand Canyon, rises the long, dome-shaped ridge of Navajo Mountain, 10,388 feet high, which the Navajo compare in appearance to a loaf of blue cornbread. They did not recognize it as a sacred peak until 1863 when a group of them found refuge there from US cavalry troops who were pursuing them. Then it revealed itself to their singers as the Head of Earth Woman, the place where Monster Slayer, the holy warrior of heroic deeds, was miraculously born and raised in a single day. Although only recently recognized, it is today a major place of pilgrimage. After growing up, Monster Slayer slew the dreaded Cliff Monster, a winged demon whose corpse turned into Shiprock, one of the highest and most spectacular buttes in the Southwest. The Navajo call it Tsé Bit'a'í or "Winged Rock" and regard it as a sacred peak. They objected when rock climbers made the first ascent of its difficult cliffs in 1939. Today they refuse to give anyone permission to climb it.[40]

The San Francisco Peaks

Unlike their neighbors, who venerate a number of different mountains, the Hopi focus most of their reverence on the San Francisco Peaks, a cluster of

discrete summits regarded as a single mountain. Spaced around the rim of an exploded crater, the peaks of this extinct volcano culminate in Humphreys Peak, 12,633 feet, the highest point in Arizona. Viewed from the Hopi mesas, eighty miles away across the open expanse of a vast plateau, the mountain appears to float in the sky, a cloud of blue crystal frosted with snow. Like Mount Kailas in Tibet, the San Francisco Peaks stand alone on the horizon, opening the mind to a mysterious sense of fathomless depth and limitless space. The Hopi call the massif Nuvatukya'ovi, the "Snow Mountain Higher than Everything Else." They revere it as the source of the clouds that bring them rain, enabling them to survive in the awesome world in which they live.

Although they share a veneration of the San Francisco Peaks with the Navajo, the Hopi relate to them in a very different way, reflecting profound differences in their societies and religious traditions. The Navajo traditionally lead pastoral lives, living in isolated *hogans* and herding sheep. They perform rituals invoking the power of sacred mountains mostly for the benefit of individuals whenever they get sick or need help. The Hopi, on the other hand, live together in houses perched on mesas, farming the land beneath their villages. The ceremonies that involve the San Francisco Peaks follow a rigid schedule set by the agricultural calendar. Priests perform them for the well-being of the entire community rather than for the welfare of individual members. Since knowledge belongs to the priesthood and comes from initiations, the Hopi tend to be much more secretive than the Navajo about religious practices having to do with the San Francisco Peaks. In addition, since each village and clan has its own beliefs and traditions, they disagree among themselves as to what many of those practices are, making it difficult to say anything definitive about them.

The Hopi view the San Francisco Peaks as one of the principal dwellings of the *katsinas*, supernatural beings on whose goodwill they depend for their livelihood and survival. Sometimes regarded as messengers of the ancestors, sometimes as ancestral spirits themselves, they take the shapes of clouds, swelling up from the mountain to soar over the desert with rain. They also appear in semi-human forms, impersonated by masked dancers in elaborate ceremonies performed on the Hopi mesas. Through these dances the Hopi invoke the aid of the *katsinas* and call on them to take messages to their ancestors and other deities who dwell within the sacred slopes of the San Francisco Peaks.

Although they also live in other places associated with moisture, such as Kiisiwu spring to the east and Betatakin ruins to the north, legend says that the *katsinas* first appeared to the Hopi at the foot of the San Francisco Peaks. Anxious to find out the identity of these mysterious beings, seen prowling near their villages, the priests sent a young warrior to climb the mountain with an offering of feathered prayer sticks called *paahos*. Near the summit the youth

came across a *kiva*, an underground chamber used in Hopi ceremonies. A voice invited him to enter, and he descended the ladder protruding from the hatchway that served as its entrance. Inside he found a friendly man who identified himself as an immortal spirit living in the underworld beneath the mountain. A frightening creature with a black face and a long snout came out, its white teeth gleaming in the firelight, and the man said that it was a *katsina*, one of the mysterious beings the Hopi had seen. When the youth gave him the *paahos* he had brought, he was very pleased with the gift and told him the *katsinas* would form rain-bearing clouds over the mountain whenever his people prayed and offered them prayer feathers.[41]

The Hopi see the San Francisco Peaks as an enormous *kiva*, similar to the ones they use in their villages. Like the Navajo, who view it as a *hogan*, or the beam of one, the Hopi have projected the image of their ceremonial center onto the mountain, making it their equivalent of a church or temple. In 1978, during legal hearings to block the expansion of a ski resort, Hopi elders described the San Francisco Peaks as a *kiva* and compared the construction of ski runs on its slopes to the desecration of a Christian place of worship. Like the *kivas* found in pueblos, the mountain has a *sipapuni*, or hole that leads to the heavenly underworld where the ancestors dwell. There everything exists as an inverse image of the world above: when it is night here, it is day there; when it is summer here, it is winter there; while people live, they stay here; when they die, they go there. On their return from missions to the Hopi mesas, the *katsina* spirits use the *sipapuni* in the *kiva* of the San Francisco Peaks as a doorway to enter the underworld and convey their messages to the powers below.

According to the story of the young warrior, the *katsinas* came down from the mountain and dwelled among people. But after a number of years, when men and women ceased to show them the proper respect, they withdrew and no longer appeared in bodily form. At that time the Hopi began the practice of making masks and impersonating the *katsinas* as a means of embodying their spirits and invoking their aid. A Hopi told me how it feels to become a *katsina*: "When I put on the mask and start to dance, I feel something enter me, and I am no longer myself: I become someone else. A power comes, but often I don't see its effects until much later." Although nearly everyone receives an initiation into the *katsina* cult, the priests who actually perform the ceremonies come from only a few clans, such as the Badger, who have their ancestral shrines on the San Francisco Peaks and other places where the *katsinas* dwell.[42]

Each year, at the time of the winter solstice when the sun sets behind a depression beside the San Francisco Peaks, the *katsinas* leave their spirit homes and move to the Hopi mesas to enter the bodies of dancers and initiate the ceremonial season of masked dances. There they remain until July, bringing the Hopi the rain and blessings needed to prepare the ground and start their crops. Then, when the corn is high and their work is done, they return to the

underworld from which they came. Shortly after the summer solstice the Hopi give them messages to take back to the ancestors and send them off toward the San Francisco Peaks with the final ceremony of the *katsina* season, the Niman or Going Home dance. Some say that the *katsinas* go first to the sacred mountain and then disperse from there to their various homes in springs and other sites located at the points of the four directions.

A number of *katsinas* have close associations with the San Francisco Peaks. In the story of the youth who found a *kiva* on the mountain, the fearsome creature who appeared to him was a Cheveyo Katsina. This figure came down to teach the Hopi how to perform the proper ceremonies. The Nuva or Snow Katsinas come from the snowfields of the San Francisco Peaks, where they have their home. Despite their icy demeanor, they have a positive, nourishing role: they bear the winter snows that bring the water that young shoots need in spring. The Hemis Katsinas, whom dancers personify in the Niman ceremony, wear collars of sacred spruce brought from the San Francisco Peaks. The moist green needles of their costumes help to call forth the cool mist of dark clouds loaded with rain.

The Hopi go on numerous pilgrimages to the sacred mountain to leave prayer sticks and collect spruce and fir for ceremonies. Sometimes an individual

Figure 15 A Hopi doll representing a Nuva or Snow Katsina, a deity of rain closely associated with the San Francisco Peaks. Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

will run from the mesas to the San Francisco Peaks and back to encourage the *katsinas* to come quickly with life-giving rain, but most people travel there in groups, going slowly and taking the time to perform rituals along the way. In the old days, when the Hopi walked to the mountain, they would go by way of Wupatki ruins and the ice caves on Sunset Crater, where they would stop to place prayer sticks. Today most groups drive directly to the Pavasiuki ruins at the foot of the San Francisco Peaks. There, according to Hopi tradition, all the Indian nations of North America gathered for a last meeting before dispersing across the continent to the places where they now live. After performing rituals at this ancestral shrine, where undergrowth covers the barely discernible traces of an ancient village, the pilgrims climb up to the evergreen forests on the slopes of the mountain. Most groups go no farther: stopping here, they make offerings at shrines marked with weathered prayer sticks and cut boughs of fir and spruce to take back with them. Only a few elders ascend all the way to the summit of Humphreys Peak to commune with their ancestors and pray to the *katsinas* who represent them.

Visible from every Hopi village, suspended in the sky, floating on the horizon, the San Francisco Peaks make a deep impression on the Hopi, giving them a strong sense of place and eliciting powerful emotions. Every morning on rising they look toward the mountain and throw corn meal in its direction. The sight of its luminous peaks fills them with energy and gives them a feeling of well-being, similar to what they experience in watching the *katsina* dances. One Hopi summed up his people's feelings about the San Francisco Peaks by saying, "They house the divine source of our sustenance in all respects – physical as well as spiritual." Before telling me anything about the mountain, another person took me to the edge of the mesa and said, "Let's just look at it first." He wanted me to see that the sheer, physical presence of the San Francisco Peaks has a powerful spiritual effect – an effect that I felt that morning when I rose to look at them at dawn and a coyote glided by and stopped to look at me.

As a place of powerful deities, the mountain also inspires fear. A Hopi woman told me, "You must be careful to look at the San Francisco Peaks with good thoughts. If you look at them with anger, thinking something bad, the spirits who live there, not just the *katsinas*, may strike you." People who go on pilgrimages to the San Francisco Peaks have to maintain the proper attitude. If they quarrel among themselves or question what they are doing, the spirits of the mountain will punish them. Some pilgrims go singing songs to remove all hurtful thoughts from their minds, replacing them with kindness to keep from desecrating the sacred place with anger. Members of certain clans whose ancestors offended the *katsinas* of the mountain must avoid going near the San Francisco Peaks. Whereas Plains Indians seek visions of guiding spirits on high hills or mountains, the last thing Hopis want is a vision of a *katsina* on their

sacred mountain. "If we see or hear a *katsina* there," the Hopi woman added, "that means we didn't have enough faith, and the *katsina* had to reveal himself. In three days we will be punished for our lack of faith."

A transgression against the powerful spirits who inhabit the San Francisco Peaks can have consequences far worse than the punishment of single individual. It may endanger the welfare of the community and even the future of the world itself. Offending the katsinas by thinking bad thoughts on a pilgrimage to the San Francisco Peaks may, for example, cause them to withhold the rain, endangering the crops of everyone in the tribe. The Hopi view themselves as custodians of the land, entrusted with ritual practices required for its care and protection. They believe that if they do not perform their ceremonies correctly, maintaining the sanctity of natural shrines like the San Francisco Peaks, drought and famine will result. They fear that they may even lose their right to the land they were given to protect; legal deeds of ownership according to the laws of secular society mean little or nothing in comparison to the entitlements and obligations of sacred ceremony. Their prophecies add that if the Hopi allow their ritual practices to deteriorate sufficiently, evil will increase and earthquakes, floods, and chaos will destroy the world.

Concern over the need to maintain the efficacy of their ceremonies drove the Hopi to join with the Navajo in an attempt to block the expansion of a ski resort desecrating the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks. In 1972, without consulting any of the Native Americans involved, the United States Forest Service formulated a master plan for the development of the sacred mountain. Up to this time the Hopi and Navajo had had no recourse to legal representation and had been unable to prevent the original construction of the Arizona Ski Bowl on the San Francisco Peaks in the 1950s. When he heard about the plan, Ben Hufford, a lawyer with the recently formed Legal Services Corporation, offered to represent them if they wanted to contest it. They did. Surprised by their unexpected intrusion into the process, the Forest Service agreed to ban development on the higher parts of the San Francisco Peaks. At that point the company that owned the ski resort applied for permission to build condominiums on the lower slopes of the mountain. When the zoning commission approved the construction, Hufford went to court, where he argued that the development violated the Native Americans' constitutional right to practice religion without obstruction and that the application for rezoning had been made improperly. He won the case on the superficial technicalities of the second point rather than on the deeper issues of religious freedom raised in the first.

Two years later the company returned with a properly completed application. This time, when the zoning commission held its hearing, 2,000 people attended: the Native Americans had gained the support of many local residents who opposed the development of an unspoiled area. Navajo medicine men and

Hopi priests and elders who had been reluctant to speak publicly about sacred matters stood up to voice their peoples' feelings about the San Francisco Peaks and why they must not be desecrated, arguing that the well-being of their tribes depended on their ability to maintain a harmonious relationship with the sacred mountain. Impressed by the sincerity of the speeches and the support of the audience, the commission turned down the application for rezoning.

In 1978 a new company, which had bought out the old one, decided to expand the Arizona Ski Bowl within the boundaries of the original permit. Once again the Hopi and Navajo tried to prevent any further desecration of the sacred mountain. But this time the Forest Service ruled against them, pointing out that the San Francisco Peaks lay on public lands off American Indian reservations. The Federal Court of Appeals upheld the ruling on the grounds that while the ski area did interfere with ceremonial practices on the mountain, those practices, in its opinion, were not central to the Hopi and Navajo religions and did not, therefore, violate their constitutional rights. When the elders and medicine men appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, the justices refused to hear the case, and the company went ahead with construction of the ski runs, leaving white scars that can be seen from far away.

A Hopi spokesman had foretold his people's reactions to this act of desecration by noting that the Hopi derived much of their sense of spiritual well-being from prayers and songs in which they saw "a perfect mountain with perfect beings in perfect balance with each other." If they knew the San Francisco Peaks were scarred by ski runs, they would no longer be able to visualize them properly in their religious practices. "And, if I am not able to achieve this kind of spiritual satisfaction because of that," he had concluded, with an eloquence that speaks for many other Native Americans today, "I have been hurt, I have been damaged."[43]

Adding to the injury already inflicted, in 2002 the management of the Arizona Ski Bowl proposed using "grey" wastewater from the city of Flagstaff to make artificial snow to compensate for erratic natural snowfall and extend the ski season. It would be hard to imagine anything more sacrilegious than turning a sacred mountain into a toilet bowl. Thirteen tribes formed a "Save the Peaks Coalition" and with the help of various environmental organizations, they contested the proposed desecration, citing the religious values of the San Francisco Peaks. Despite their efforts, in 2005 the Forest Service found in favor of the Arizona Ski Bowl. The Navajo Nation and the Sierra Club initiated a series of legal appeals in which various courts went back and forth on approving the use of grey water on the sacred mountain, culminating in a refusal by the US Supreme Court to hear the case. In the winter of 2013–14 the Arizona Ski Bowl began making artificial snow with polluted sewage. Signs warned skiers, "Do not eat the snow" – a minor consideration given the damage done to the many tribes for whom the mountain is sacred.[44]

THE EAST COAST

The mountains of eastern North America lack the impressive height and spectacular appearance of their western counterparts. Much older ranges than the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada, rounded down by millions of years of erosion, the granite knobs of the Appalachian and Adirondack Mountains no longer leap up with blades of rock to slash the sky. With a few exceptions a heavy cover of forest softens their summits and obscures the kind of spacious views that open the mind to ecstatic experiences. Blending with the terrain around them, they encourage a quiet kind of peaceful contemplation. Rather than seek out the exposed heights of stormy peaks, Native Americans of the Eastern woodlands have tended to pursue their vision quests in the secluded depths of forests where spirits dwell among the shadows of silent trees.

Although they do not make it a common practice to go to summits in search of visions, eastern tribes such as the Cherokee in the south and the Iroquois in the north regard certain mountains as places of special power and significance. According to a myth held so sacred by the Cherokee that one could only hear it after purifying oneself in a ritual bath, Mount Mitchell (Attakulla in Cherokee) – the highest peak east of the Mississippi, rising to 6,684 feet in the Appalachians of North Carolina – had a sacred cave from which game animals magically issued like food from the cauldron of plenty in the fairy hills of Celtic mythology. The Seneca, one of the tribes making up the original Iroquois Confederacy, maintain a special relationship with a mountain in upper New York State. According to one of their traditions, their ancestors emerged from the earth of a bare-topped hill at the head of Canandaigua Lake near Rochester. As a consequence of this view of their tribal origins, the Seneca call themselves the "People of the Mountain." Because of the sanctity of the hill, they would go there to hold important council meetings on its summit. The tradition linking the Seneca to their mountain reflects the intimate connection they felt with the earth, the mother who had given birth to their people.[45]

Great Smoky Mountains and Clingmans Dome (Kuwa'hi)

Near the southern end of the Appalachians, a smoky blue haze emitted by trees smooths out distant views of the long, undulating ridges of the Great Smoky Mountains, giving them a diaphanous, other worldly appearance, as if they were about to dissolve into the sky. A portion of this range running through North Carolina occupies a special place for the Cherokee people as an important part of their ancestral homeland, sanctified in their creation stories. According to one of their traditions, long ago, when the earth was formed, it was muddy and soft. The Great Buzzard flew forth to dry out the mud with the wind of its wings so that people could walk and live on solid ground. Where its wings went down,

they pushed down valleys, and where its wings went up, they pulled up mountains. That is why, according to Cherokees, their homeland is so mountainous. The eloquent, deeply felt words of the Cherokee elder, Jerry Wolfe, highlight the reciprocal relationship his people have with the sacred mountains that have sustained and sheltered them for untold numbers of years:

> The Great Smoky Mountains are a sanctuary for the Cherokee people. We have always believed the mountains and streams provide all that we need for survival. We hold these mountains sacred, believing that the Cherokee were chosen to take care of the mountains as the mountains take care of us.

Clingmans Dome, the highest peak in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, rises to 6,643 feet near the Qualla Boundary, tribal lands owned by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. The Cherokees regard Kuwa'hi, their name for the mountain in the Cherokee language, as a sacred place of healing and refuge. According to a traditional account passed down by the Cherokee storyteller, Freeman Owle, a boy followed a bear cub with a damaged leg up to the top of Clingmans Dome and saw it jump into a pool of fog that turned into a magic lake. The cub swam across the water and came out the other side completely healed, as did other animals and birds with broken limbs and wings. The story concludes with the Great Spirit telling the boy, "Go back and tell your brothers and sisters, the Cherokee, if they love me, if they love all their brothers and sisters, and if they love the animals of the earth, when they grow old and sick, they too can come to a magic lake and be made well again."[46]

In 1838, following the Indian Removal Act signed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830 and carried out by his successor, Martin Van Buren, Federal troops forced 15,000 Cherokees to leave their tribal lands and trek over 2,000 miles to Oklahoma under appalling conditions. Along the way more than 4,000 of them died from disease and exhaustion in what came to be known as "The Trail of Tears." Their descendants constitute the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, one of the largest American Indian nations in the United States. Up to 1,000 Cherokees avoided removal by hiding out in the wild slopes and forests of Clingmans Dome and nearby mountains. When it was safe, they came down from their sacred sanctuary and joined the few Cherokees allowed to remain behind to establish the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians in their original homeland of the Smoky Mountains, centered around the town of Cherokee in North Carolina.

Mount Katahdin

Near the opposite, northern end of the Appalachians stands the most imposing mountain in the eastern part of the continent. A lonely massif of frost-shattered

granite, Mount Katahdin, 5,269 feet high, rises steeply over the wilderness of northern Maine. The Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes of the region have regarded the mountain as the awesome abode of various deities. There, close to the spirit of the night wind, itself a manifestation of Katahdin, perched a storm bird of terrible wrath. Within the mountain itself, as in a lodge, lived a benevolent giant with eyebrows of stone. According to legend, he sometimes took native women for wives and fathered sons with supernatural powers. For fear of the storm bird and the reach of his claws, the Penobscott and Passamquoddy stayed away from the summit of Katahdin.[47]

The mountain also made a profound impression on non-Indians. In 1846, while living at Walden Pond, Thoreau took a trip to Mount Katahdin. Climbing the mountain alone, he emerged from the forest into a harsh and eerie realm of misted boulders that stunned him with an overwhelming experience of otherness:

> It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose gratings of his ribs as he ascends. He is more alone than you can imagine . . . Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors . . . Shoudst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear.[48]

So completely alien, so utterly sacred had Nature become on Mount Katahdin that it lay beyond all reach of any prayer or appeal that any mortal could ever hope to make. There, on the heights of the mountain, Thoreau confronted an aspect of wilderness far more awesome than anything he had ever experienced in the friendly woods of Walden Pond.

Mount Marcy

In 1898 the well-known philosopher and psychologist William James went camping on Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the wild Adirondack Mountains of New York State. Lying awake one night in a condition of "spiritual alertness," he had a visionary experience of something incredibly meaningful and perplexing, which he attempted to describe in a letter to a friend:

> I spent a good deal of [the night] in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable

> meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life . . .The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay . . . In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a mere boulder of *impression*.[49]

James had this experience only a short time before delivering a series of lectures that became one of his most famous and influential works – *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It was the closest that he himself ever came to having the kind of mystical experiences that he explored and analyzed in others.

An Iroquois youth, for whom Mount Marcy was sacred, would not have come away from such an experience with "a mere boulder of impression." His tradition would have put it in a context making it understandable as an encounter with the kind of spiritual powers sought in a typical vision quest. An older, wiser man would have explained to him the meaning of what he had experienced and what it portended for his life. James lacked a cultural background that understood and encouraged such experiences, particularly in the physical realm of "nature-mythologies." As a consequence, the events of his night on Mount Marcy remained for him something of inexplicable import charged with intense emotional significance.

It is vital to understand, or at least appreciate, the significance of the feelings that William James experienced on Mount Marcy. On such an understanding our lives and the future of our world may well depend. Native American views of sacred mountains are not just matters of limited cultural interest. They raise issues of environmental and spiritual importance that concern us all.

While doing research on the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, I decided to drive to New Mexico and see Mount Taylor. As I pulled off the highway to go around a building for a better view of the peak, I was stopped by the sight of a weathered sign standing beside a wooden cross. I got out of the car to look at it. In bleak letters printed in black, it read:

> Caution Radiation Air, Water, and Land Contaminated by Homestake Milling Co.

I looked down at my feet and shook the dust off my shoes, regarding the earth around me with a sudden twinge of fear and suspicion.

Mount Taylor, the sacred mountain of the south for the Navajo, has suffered one of the worst forms of desecration imaginable. As I learned the next day in the town of Grants, the peak was the center of the most concentrated uranium mining in the United States. Waste left from this mining – and the milling that went with it – has contaminated the mountain with radioactive soil and dust. On the east side of Mount Taylor, the largest open pit uranium mine in North

America has polluted the drinking water of the Laguna Pueblo, another tribe for whom the peak is sacred, with chemical and nuclear poisons. In a grim twist of irony, the mountain to which Navajo singers have traditionally gone for medicinal herbs and the power to heal has become a source of sickness and death.

The problems posed by the desecration of the sacred peak extend far beyond the immediate vicinity of Mount Taylor. The mountain rises next to a major interstate highway that handles much of the traffic crossing the southern part of the United States. A number of important tourist sites, including Acoma Pueblo, one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in the country, lie within sight of the peak – and reach of the radioactive dust that blows from its slopes. Albuquerque, the largest city in New Mexico, is only sixty miles from Mount Taylor. Wastes from uranium mining throughout the Southwest constitute a much greater threat to public health than waste from nuclear reactors. Ignorant of the invisible hazards of their work, many miners – mostly Native American and Mexican American – have contracted lung cancer and died from breathing radon gas and radioactive dust. Children play on deadly tailing piles strewn like sandboxes around the countryside. In places like Durango, Colorado, people have discovered to their horror that they live in radioactive houses built with cement made from these tailings. In 1989, after years of delay in negotiations over costs and plans, partial restoration work began at Mount Taylor, aimed at filling in and covering up the worst of the damage. Nobody knows how to dispose completely of the radioactive wastes that have accumulated at Laguna Pueblo and elsewhere in the Southwest. Any solution to the problem will require massive efforts by business and government in response to public pressure.[50]

To generate the interest and energy required to reclaim and preserve the environment, we need to feel the kind of relationship to the land expressed in Native American views of sacred mountains. When I asked a woman from Acoma Pueblo how she felt about what had happened on Mount Taylor, she said, very simply, "It hurts." Perhaps, when it hurts us enough, we will finally do something about it – and make sure it never happens again.

TEN

LATIN AMERICA

Mountains of Vanished Empires

From Mexico in the north to Argentina and Chile in the south, Latin America includes within its far-flung boundaries some of the highest and most mysterious mountains in the world. Like fumes slowly dissipating from past eruptions, memories of little-known civilizations linger around the cones of Mexican volcanoes such as Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. The surrounding highlands of Mexico and Central America hold ruins with ancient pyramids whose forms reflect the shapes of mountains still revered by native peoples. From the warm Caribbean shores of Colombia and Venezuela to the icy fjords of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, the Andes stretch 4,500 miles down the west coast of South America to form the longest mountain range in the world. Soaring over the second driest desert and the largest jungle on earth – the Atacama and the Amazon – these mountains reach their greatest height in the rugged peak of Aconcagua, at 22,837 feet in Argentina the highest mountain outside of Asia. Like the ranges of Mexico and Guatemala to the north, the Andes conceal among their heights the ruins of ancient civilizations of which we know only shards and scraps. Elsewhere, to the east of the snow-capped Andean wall, mysterious mesas of primeval rock called *tepuis* rise out of the jungles of Venezuela and Brazil to preserve on their isolated summits remnants of prehistoric plants and animals.

Auyantepui, the most expansive of the *tepui*s with a summit plateau area of 260 square miles, has Angel Falls, the world highest waterfall, falling free nearly 3,000 feet off the cliffs that surround the *tepui* on all sides like the walls of

a fortress or castle. The Pemón Indians who live in the warm jungle and savannah at its foot consider the top of the chilly mesa the sacred abode of a dangerous spirit named Maichak. According to one of their stories, a Pemón man fell in love with the wife of a shaman, and they ran off together. As punishment for their transgression against the shaman, who sought revenge, Maichak turned the two lovers into spirits and imprisoned them in rocks on the summit, there to remain forever apart. Until recently not even Pemón shamans dared to scale Auyantepui's daunting walls of rock and venture onto its strange and frightening heights, making the lofty plateau one of the few true wilderness areas in the world – complete with vegetation and wildlife, rather than inhospitable desert or glaciers. The impregnable nature of this mountaintop sanctuary became apparent to me when we had to use handholds and ropes to climb cliffs up the easiest route to the primordial world hidden on top of the sacred mesa.[1]

The earliest inhabitants of Latin America followed mountain ranges down from North America around 20,000 years ago. As they progressed through Mexico to Central and South America, they developed complex societies that between 1000 BCE and 1500 CE created some of the most extraordinary civilizations known to history – the Olmec, the Maya, the Aztec, the Chavín, the Tiahuanaco, the Inca, and others. As these civilizations rose and fell, their memories obscured or obliterated by their successors, they left behind the ruins of magnificent cities, temples, and works of art, many of them located near or among the highest peaks in Latin America. The placement of these ruins, some of them as high as 22,000 feet above sea level, reveals that the worship of mountains played an important role in the lives of the peoples who built them. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the sixteenth century, they found the last of the pre-Columbian empires, the Aztec and the Inca, centered around the lofty cities of Tenochtitlán at 7,000 feet in the Valley of Mexico and Cuzco at 11,000 feet in the Andes of Peru.

Because they were the last to fall, the pre-Columbian civilizations of which we know the most are the Aztec and Inca. The Spanish who conquered their empires left eye-witness accounts of their religious beliefs and practices, albeit biased. The Dominican friar Diego Durán, one of our principal sources, begins his description of the gods and rites of the Aztec religion with the following passage:

> I am moved, O Christian reader, to begin the task [of writing this work] with the realization that we who have been chosen to instruct the Indians will never reveal the True God to them until the heathen ceremonies and false cults of their counterfeit deities are extinguished, erased. Here I shall set down a written account of the ancient idolatries and false religion with which the devil was worshiped until the Holy Gospel was brought to this land.[2]

Despite the efforts of the Catholic Church to eradicate them, remnants of pre-Columbian beliefs and practices, especially those concerning mountains, have survived among native peoples descended from the Aztecs, the Incas, and other civilizations. These contemporary beliefs and practices afford additional windows opening onto views of sacred summits that once held sway over cultures throughout much of Latin America.

MEXICO

A series of high plateaus and valleys bordered by mountain ranges occupies most of the land surface of Mexico. The slow westward drift of the Western Hemisphere has thrown up the peaks and ridges of the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental, two long cordilleras that run down either side of the country from its border with the United States in the north. At their southern ends they intersect with the Sierra Volcánica Transversal, a range of volcanic peaks that extends from the Gulf of Mexico in the east to the Pacific Coast in the west. Here, where the grinding together of tectonic plates has generated immense amounts of subterranean heat, the mountains of Mexico shoot up to their greatest altitudes in the volcanoes of the Pico de Orizaba (Citlaltépetl), Iztaccíhuatl, and Popocatépetl. In a broad flat valley beneath the snows of the latter two peaks lies Mexico City, the site of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán.

The earliest pre-Columbian civilization to create a highly developed society, the Olmec, rose around 1000 BCE in the lowlands bordering the Gulf of Mexico. Its sophisticated culture, expressed most powerfully in enormous heads of stone, influenced later civilizations that developed in the highlands of Mexico and Central America. During the first half of the first millennium CE, the mysterious city of Teotihuacán with its great pyramids of the sun and moon took form in a valley northeast of Mexico City. With a population of more than 100,000 people, this city became the center of what may have been the largest empire of pre-Columbian Middle America. During the same period, another great civilization, that of the Maya, rose in the lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula and Guatemala. After the collapse of Teotihuacán around 500 CE, the Maya, who constructed cities of pyramids in the jungle, and the Zapotec, who founded a great pyramid complex on top of Monte Alban, became the predominant powers of the region. When their rule came to an end around 900 CE, the fierce Toltec gained ascendency in the mountains of Mexico with their capital at Tula, not far from Mexico City.

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the Aztecs, a war-like people who spoke a language related to that of the Hopi in the United States, wandered in from the north to establish their capital of Tenochtitlán on an island in a lake where Mexico City stands today. There they built a huge metropolis with

more than 150,000 inhabitants, far more populous than any European city of the period. With great brutality the Aztecs defeated their enemies and created in the fifteenth century an empire whose existence depended in part on human sacrifice. From the civilizations that preceded them – such as the Toltec, the Maya, and that of Teotihuacán – they adopted various deities, in particular, Tlaloc, the god of rain and storm associated with mountains.

Perhaps no civilization other than the Chinese or Japanese elevated mountain worship to such heights of ritual importance as did the Aztec – or Mexica, as they called themselves. Like the emperors of China, Aztec rulers would ascend sacred hills and peaks to make offerings and perform sacrifices to the gods. They made the veneration of mountains an integral part of state ceremony and religion. The Aztecs regarded prominent peaks, especially those around whose summits rain clouds tended to gather, as gods whom they worshipped as sources of water and fertility. In their ceremonies they fashioned images of mountains in human forms, which they treated as they did statues of other deities. They also viewed high peaks as powerful originators of diseases that came down with the wind and cold that swirled off their icy summits. Believing the mountains capable of curing the very ailments they inflicted, the sick would commission priests to make elaborate offerings to the peak that stood closest to the village where they lived – images of deities made of dough, embellished with eyes of black beans and teeth of pumpkin seeds, adorned with streamers of paper, and surrounded by lavish gifts of food and drink.[3]

But the most distinctive and horrifying feature of Aztec worship of sacred mountains was the practice of human sacrifice. On many of the feast days that filled the ceremonial calendar, priests would offer up men, women, and children to mountain deities, high on the peaks and hills themselves or down in temples dedicated to them in villages and cities throughout the land. In the beginning of the first month of the year, the Aztecs celebrated one of their most important ceremonies – a great festival devoted to the gods of rain and water. In preparation for the day of this feast, they would seek out infants with double cowlicks in their hair and buy them from their mothers. Dressing them in fine clothes and placing them in litters adorned with plumes and flowers, they would bear the doomed children, amid singing and dancing, up to the tops of hills and mountains. There the priests would tear out the hearts of the infants and distribute pieces of their bodies to be cooked and eaten by the people present. Bernardino de Sahagún, a sixteenth-century Franciscan friar who wrote a detailed account of the Aztec religion, described one of the most pitiable aspects of these sacrifices in the following words:

> And if the children went crying, if their tears kept flowing, it was said, it was stated: "It will surely rain." Their tears signified rain. Therefore there was contentment; therefore one's heart was at rest.[4]

The blood of the victim was offered in exchange for water, the blood of the earth. Without such offerings the Aztecs feared that streams would cease to flow from the mountains and the people would die of famine.

Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl

On rare days when murky smog thins to a translucent haze, two snow-capped peaks materialize like clouds, swelling up over the mountains southeast of Mexico City. Rising 10,000 feet above the valley floor to altitudes of 17,802 feet and 17,160 feet respectively, the steep cone of Popocatépetl and the white mass of Iztaccíhuatl appear to belong to a higher and purer world, not yet polluted by the industrial wastes of humans. Viewed from Tenochtitlán in the time of the Aztecs, the two peaks must have sparkled in a clean blue sky – when they were not gathering black clouds about their summits in preparation for releasing violent storms. Because of their location, close to the center of the empire, Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl played a more important role in Aztec religion than did the Pico de Orizaba, the highest mountain in Mexico, 18,491 feet high and more than 100 miles away.

The Aztecs revered Popocatépetl, whose name means "Smoking Mountain," as one of the most important of their many sacred mountains. Its rich volcanic soil combined with a congenial climate and abundant water to make its lower slopes one of the most fertile and heavily populated areas of pre-Columbian Mexico. The closer maize and wheat grew to the peak itself, the earlier they ripened and the better they tasted. Despite the wrathful nature of its eruptions, the mountain represented to many Aztecs a divine embodiment of all that was good and desirable. Pilgrims would come from distant regions to fulfill vows and throw offerings of gold and precious stones into the mountain's springs, streams, and deep-cut ravines. As a major source of water, the volcano had a particularly close association with the goddess of springs and rivers.

Tepeilhuitl, the Feast of Mountains, celebrated in the thirteenth month of the ceremonial calendar, centered on Popocatépetl and the peaks around it. People would fashion images of the volcano out of dough made from amaranth and maize flour. These they would decorate with eyes and mouths and place in their homes, surrounded by figures representing the other mountains of the region. Dressing them with paper caps and tunics, they would perform ceremonies and make offerings to the images. After two days they would decapitate and eat them, as they did victims of human sacrifice. This ceremonial meal they called Nicteocua, which means "I Eat God." During the Feast of Mountains, people also climbed to the summits of nearby hills and peaks to light fires and burn incense.[5]

Right beside the image of Popocatépetl in the center of each household shrine prepared for the festival, worshippers would place a dough image of Iztaccíhuatl,

the "White Woman." A goddess of high repute, she resided in permanent images kept in various city temples and inside a cave high on the mountain itself. A wooden statue showing her robed in blue with a crown of white paper stood in a shrine in Tenochtitlán. The image had the face of a young woman with hair clipped short in front and hanging long to her shoulders on the sides. On the day of Iztaccíhuatl's special feast, a female slave would be arrayed in green with a white crown set on her head, representing the snows above the forests of the peak. Having given her the name of the goddess, the priests would sacrifice her in front of the image in the capital. Accompanied by nobles, two little boys and two little girls would be borne in litters up to the cave on the sacred mountain, there to be sacrificed before another statue, amid lavish offerings of jewels, feathered headdresses, clothing, and food. The retinue of aristocrats would remain for two days on the heights of Iztaccíhuatl, fasting and performing ceremonies in honor of the White Woman, who embodied the divine power of the peak itself.[6]

Both Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatépetl are covered with the ruins of shrines dating back to the Aztec period – and possibly even earlier. The Mexican archaeologist José Luis Lorenzo has identified at least ten sites at about 12,000 feet, not far from the snowline of the two peaks. Religious activities continue at some of these shrines, even today. Every year on May 3, people come from distant villages to climb Iztaccíhuatl to attend a ceremony performed at the shrine of Alcalican. There, at night, high on the slopes of the sacred mountain, they seek to make contact with their *nahuals*, guardian spirits who take the form of animals to protect their human charges with supernatural power and insight.[7]

The physical proximity of Iztaccíhuatl to Popocatépetl has brought the two peaks together in a popular legend that originated after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. According to this legend, Popocatépetl was a warrior of an Aztec tribe who fell in love with Iztaccíhuatl, the daughter of the tribal chief. When the lovers went to her father, he told them that he would agree to their marriage only if Popocatépetl would first conquer an enemy tribe and bring him the head of its leader. The young warrior succeeded in his mission, but he took so long that Iztaccíhuatl, thinking he had perished, succumbed to sorrow. When Popocatépetl returned in triumph to find his lover dead, he picked her up and carried her to the top of a nearby mountain. Overcome with grief, he laid her body to rest on the long summit ridge, which assumed the form of a sleeping woman – the shape that many people see in the outline of Iztaccíhuatl today. There Popocatépetl has remained, standing with a torch lit to watch over his lover, which accounts for the smoke that issues from the volcano that bears his name.[8]

Tlaloc

Just north of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl rises another mountain, lower and less impressive than the two snow-capped peaks, but closer to Tenochtitlán and

more prominent in the state ritual of the Aztec emperors. The Aztecs regarded this mountain, Tlaloc, 13,615 feet high, as a great storehouse of clouds, mist, rain, and snow. There, on or within its rocky summit, dwelled one of the greatest deities of the Aztec pantheon. God of rain and lightning, thunder and storm, Tlaloc shared the main temple of Tenochtitlán with Huitzilopochtli, the mighty lord of war. This temple stood on top of a great pyramid located at the center of the city. Its placement there, characteristic of similar temples throughout Mexico and Central America, suggests that the pyramids of earlier civilizations, such as the Maya, functioned, in part, as symbolic mountains whose summits represented the dwelling places of the gods.[9]

Diego Durán gives us a vivid description of the image of Tlaloc that once stood carved in stone on top of the pyramid that enshrined the sacred power and secular might of the Aztec empire:

> Its horrendous face was like that of a serpent with huge fangs; it was bright and red like a flaming fire. This was a symbol of the brilliance of the lightning and rays cast from the heavens when he sent tempests and thunderbolts; to express the same thing, he was clad totally in red. His head was crowned with a great panache of green feathers, shining, beautiful, rich. From his neck hung a string of green beads of jade in the form of a necklace and hanging from it a round emerald set in gold . . . In his right hand [Tlaloc] carried a purple wooden thunderbolt, curved like the lightning which falls from the clouds, wriggling like a snake toward the earth.[10]

Another image of Tlaloc, similar to the one in Tenochtitlán, stood in a temple built on the summit of the mountain that bears his name. A wall eight feet high, plastered with stucco and crowned with spikes, enclosed a square courtyard with a wooden chamber that contained the statue of the god. Like a crown on the head of a king, its outline stood out sharp against the sky, visible from miles away. No other peak in Mexico had a higher or more impressive shrine situated on its very summit. The ruins of this temple still stand on top of Mount Tlaloc, weathered walls of stone now inhabited by the whispering spirits of mist and wind.[11]

Each year in spring, accompanied by a vast retinue of nobles and princes, the Aztec emperor would ascend to the summit of Tlaloc to beseech the god of the mountain to grant his people a good harvest. A great procession would bear a closed litter containing a six-year old child into the courtyard of the temple. There, in the red light of dawn, concealed behind a curtain of cloth, the throat of the young victim would be slit to the wild music of trumpets, conches, and flutes. Following the sacrifice, the emperor would advance to the great statue of Tlaloc and place a feathered crest on its head and fine garments on its body. After he and the other rulers had spread a banquet of food before the god,

priests would sprinkle a portion of the child's blood on the offerings and pour the remainder over the statue itself. Then the emperor and his retinue would return to their quarters to feast and dine before descending to the lowlands. Guards would remain behind to watch over the offerings as they slowly rotted away in the thin cold air of the mountain heights.[12]

ANDES

Like a raised binding stitched along the edge of a blanket, the Andes form a sinuous line of folded rock that traces the western coast of South America. The immense pressure of the continent riding up over the Nazca Plate of the Pacific Ocean has buckled the earth's crust, producing a narrow range of mountains 22,000 feet high, overlooking one of the deepest submarine trenches in the world, the Peru-Chile Trench 25,000 feet deep. The geological forces responsible for this enormous disparity of elevation – 47,000 feet within a horizontal distance of only 100 miles – have riddled the Andes with the highest volcanoes in the world. Interspersed among groups of massive volcanoes, the Andes include alpine ranges that contain some of the sharpest and most beautiful mountains in the world: sheer pinnacles of glistening granite, like Fitzroy and the Towers of Paine in Patagonia, and delicate wisps of ice and snow, such as the peaks of the Cordillera Blanca in Peru. It is not surprising that the Incas and their predecessors regarded the Andes as the home of powerful deities.

The first major civilization known in South America appeared at Chavín de Huántar in the Cordillera Blanca around the end of the second millennium BCE. The orientation of the ceremonial center of the site suggests that the people who built it venerated high snow peaks as sacred sources of water. Distinguished by the representation of pumas, animals associated with mountain deities, the culture of Chavín influenced a number of other civilizations, such as the Moche and Nazca, that developed along the Peruvian coast between 400 BCE and 600 CE. From 600 to 1000 CE, the Tiahuanaco civilization in Bolivia spread its influence north to Peru through the Huari Empire. Like Chavín, the site of Tiahuanaco, set in a valley near Lake Titicaca, is oriented with respect to mountains revered by native Andeans today, most notably the impressive snow peak of Illimani, 21,185 feet high.[13]

Until the fifteenth century a multiplicity of cultures, each in its own valley or local area, characterized the history of South American civilizations. In 1438 the Incas, a group that had established itself at Cuzco in the thirteenth century, marched out from their mountain stronghold to conquer and unify the Andean region in an elongated empire that eventually stretched from southern Colombia in the north to central Chile in the south. Over the 2,500-mile length of this rugged empire, they established a remarkable system of roads and

administrative centers. As a means of reinforcing their rule, they also carried out a campaign to eradicate all memory of previous civilizations. This action combined with a lack of a written language – the Incas used knotted cords instead – makes it very difficult to know much about the beliefs and practices of the people who preceded them. The cultural destruction wrought by the Spanish, who in 1532 conquered the Inca Empire in search of gold, compounded the problem, making our knowledge of pre-Columbian views of sacred mountains in the Andes sketchy at best.

Where the practice of human sacrifice characterizes the worship of Mexican volcanoes by the Aztecs, the construction of religious structures at incredibly high altitudes distinguishes the veneration of Andean peaks by the Incas. In 1952, believing themselves to be the first ever to climb the mountain, two Chilean mountaineers, Bión Gonzalez and Juan Harseim, reached the barren snow-streaked summit of Llullaillaco, the seventh highest peak in the Andes. There, to their amazement, at an altitude of 22,109 feet above sea level, they came upon a low rock wall and the remains of a leather bag half-buried in the frozen ground. The Incas had beaten them to the top – by more than 400 years. Although Gonzalez and Harseim had failed to make a pioneering ascent of the mountain, they had accomplished something of far greater significance: they had discovered the highest archaeological and religious site in the world.[14]

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, hundreds of years before European mountaineers managed to reach comparable altitudes in the Himalayas in the nineteenth century, South Americans had not only climbed up to 22,000 feet in the Andes, but had stayed to build altars and living quarters on the summits they "conquered." Climbers and archaeologists have discovered more than 100 sites with Inca ruins on mountains higher than 17,000 feet, opening up the fascinating new field of high altitude archaeology. All of these sites lie well to the south of Cuzco, the capital of the Inca Empire, in the drier regions of southern Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina where the existence of elevated snowlines made the ascent of rounded volcanoes easy and the construction of permanent structures on their heights feasible. Many of them, including the very highest, rest on great volcanic peaks that rise like enormous piles of sand heaped up beside the arid wastes of the Atacama Desert.

Because they have remained relatively untouched, high altitude ruins constitute some of the most important archaeological sites in the Andes. Unlike most of their counterparts at lower elevations, whose contents have been thoroughly ransacked, they continue to provide finds of rare objects dating back to the time of the Inca empire. These objects include figurines of gold and silver, images fashioned from seashells, pieces of clothing, remnants of ancient food, and offerings of coca leaves. Researchers have speculated that the statues, depicting humans and animals, may represent deities, things that people wanted, or substitutes for sacrifices of living beings. Those who offered them

up have left no written records to describe what they were doing in the mysterious ceremonies they performed at the uppermost limits of physical endurance.

The archaeological discoveries that have attracted the most attention have been of frozen mummies preserved on the heights of Andean peaks – victims of human sacrifice. In 1954 a climber encountered two locals hurrying down from near the summit of El Plomo – a 17,815-foot dome of ice visible from Santiago, the capital of Chile – lugging a heavy bag with something big in it. They had just dug up the perfectly preserved corpse of an eight-year old boy sacrificed on the mountain during the Inca period. He was dressed in fine clothes and wore a headdress of condor feathers. They had found him buried beneath a stone enclosure, surrounded by offerings of seashells and statues. A few years later a couple of climbers came across a human head sticking out of the summit of Cerro El Toro, at 20,952 feet on the border between Chile and Argentina. They disinterred the rest of the body and took it down to a museum in Mendoza, where analysis revealed it to be the remains of a twenty-year old youth who had been intoxicated with corn liquor before being sacrificed on the desolate heights of the peak. Another climber, Antonio Beorchia, a pioneer in the field of high-altitude archaeology, found a child encased in ice on the summit of Quehar, a 20,106 foot mountain in northern Argentina, but when he returned to the site to dig it out, he found that treasure seekers had blasted the body to bits with dynamite, looking for gold images they considered more valuable.[15]

The most famous and widely publicized discovery of a high-altitude mummy took place in 1995. Johan Reinhard, an American anthropologist specializing in high-altitude archaeology, and his assistant, Miquel Zarate, were climbing Mount Ampato, 20,700 feet high, in southern Peru to get a better view of an eruption taking place on another, nearby volcano. As they approached the summit, they noticed that hot volcanic ash and gases drifting across from the other mountain had melted the snow, releasing an object that had tumbled into the dormant crater of Ampato itself. Scrambling down, they found to their surprise, since they had not been looking for artifacts, the frozen body of a young girl wrapped in cloth. Subsequent research revealed that the Incas had sacrificed her sometime between 1450 and 1480 on the summit of the mountain, perhaps as an offering to the gods. Reinhard and Zarate packed the mummy in ice and carried her down to a freezer in the town of Arequipa. Dubbed Momia (Mummy) Juanita and the Inca Ice Maiden, she travelled up to Washington, DC, where thousands, including President Clinton, saw her at the National Geographic Society before she returned to her final resting place in a museum in Peru.[16]

Four years later, in 1999, a team led by Reinhard and the Argentine archaeologist and climber, Maria Constanza Ceruti, made an even higher

discovery on Llullaillaco. Digging beneath a ceremonial platform on the summit under extreme conditions of wind and cold exacerbated by the threat of frequent lightning strikes, they unearthed three mummies – a boy seven years old, a girl six, and a young woman fifteen, all of them better preserved than Juanita. They had been drugged, placed in shallow pits, and left to die in the icy air at over 22,000 above sea level. Because their bodies had been protected by a covering of earth and had frozen before they could become desiccated, their internal organs had remained intact, to the point that the heart of one of them still contained frozen blood. Two nearby rectangular structures made of stones showed that Inca priests had stayed on the summit for days, if not weeks or months. The lack of permanent snow due to the extreme dryness of the nearby Atacama Desert had enabled them to walk with relative ease all the way up the mountain with llamas carrying their supplies.[17]

What drove the Incas to climb to such extreme heights to build religious structures and offer human sacrifices? Whereas Durán and Sahagún have left us detailed accounts of Aztec rituals performed on mountains such as Tlaloc and Iztaccíhuatl in Mexico, we have no comparable written records describing Inca practices on high peaks of the Andes. Many observers have assumed that these practices were devoted to sun worship, which we know to have played a major role in Inca religion, but the archaeological sites themselves have yielded no convincing evidence of this. Nor have they given much support to other conjectures that the Incas and their predecessors climbed high peaks to construct signaling stations or to pray to deities guarding gold and other sacred metals hidden inside the mountains.

Taking a completely different approach, drawing on observations of contemporary practices among native Andeans, Reinhard has proposed a hypothesis that seems to account for the incredible efforts devoted by the Incas to climbing and constructing religious sites on the summits of the some of the highest peaks in the Andes. Each year the people of Socaire, a village in the dry Atacama region of northern Chile, perform a ceremony in which they make offerings to more than twenty mountains to invoke their aid in bringing rain. Researchers have climbed fifteen of these mountains, and on thirteen of them they have discovered Inca ruins. Reinhard also observed that the relative importance of the peaks in the ceremony correlates with the size and significance of the archaeological sites found on their summits. Archaic features of the ritual and other deities invoked, such as Pachamama, Inca goddess of the earth, indicate a tradition reaching back to the time when the Incas constructed the now abandoned ruins. All this suggests that they built and used these ruins for the same reason that their descendants in Socaire now make offerings to the peaks on which the sites are found – to ask the mountain deities who control the weather to send them water to irrigate their fields.

Elsewhere in the Andes, people still climb up to summits as high as 18,000 feet to perform ceremonies asking mountains for rain, and on the Island of the Sun in Lake Titicaca, Aymara Indians regularly sacrifice llamas to Illimani and Illampu, two of the highest and most sacred peaks in Bolivia, in return for water to irrigate their crops. Such practices would also appear to explain the presence of the human sacrifices on the summits of high peaks such as Ampato and Llullaillaco. In 1942 and 1945, some villagers in Peru sacrificed children, with the approval of their parents, to prevent a drought, and as recently as 1958 another human sacrifice for rain reportedly occurred on top of a mountain near Lake Titicaca. Offerings of sea shells – symbols of the ocean, mother of waters – found with the ancient mummies, and in numerous other high altitude sites, provide archaeological evidence that the Incas regarded high peaks as sacred sources of water to be obtained by building religious structures and performing ceremonies on their summits.[18]

Survivals of ancient beliefs and practices lend added support to Reinhard's hypothesis that the pre-Columbian cultures of the Andes worshipped mountains as weather gods responsible for dispensing water and insuring fertility. Along with the sun god, the Incas focused much of their religious attention on a deity of thunder and lightning known as Illapa, "the Flashing One." Lord of storms, he controlled the natural forces of wind, rain, hail, and snow. In times of drought, people would climb up to high places to make offerings to him. The Aymara of the Bolivian Altiplano had a similar deity, called Tunupa, whom they associated with Illimani, the highest and most important mountain in the vicinity of Lake Titicaca. As lord of storms, Illapa was also a powerful god of war: the great Inca emperor Pachacuti carried his image into battle when he went forth to found the Inca empire in 1438.

Many of the mountain deities or spirits worshipped by Andeans today share the attributes of this ancient god of war and weather. Called *apus*, *wamanis*, *aukis*, *achachilas*, and *mallkus*, they inhabit the high peaks of the Andes, where wrapped in clouds they control the impressive meteorological phenomena of rain, hail, snow, thunder, and lightning. Often regarded as the most powerful deities in the region, people look up to them as war-like protectors of their livestock, as well as sources of life-giving rain and water. Dependent upon their goodwill for their survival, villagers climb up to high places to placate them with offerings of coca leaves and sacrifices of animals such as llamas.

The term *apu*, the title of mountain deities in much of Peru, comes from the ancient Inca word for "chief or lord." Like rulers of men, *apus* have hierarchies of subordinates arranged on human models of political organization complete with governors, judges, and other functionaries. They also possess palaces concealed within mountains and lands filled with their livestock, the wild animals who frequent the heights: foxes are an *apu*'s dogs, pumas his cats, and llama-like vicuñas and guanacos his domesticated llamas. People regard

Figure 16 Two Andean *curanderos* or traditional healers with their ritual implements. They derive their power to diagnose and cure from their relationship to the *apu*s or deities of their sacred mountains near Cuzco. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

condors as the special messengers of mountain deities, the intermediaries through whom they communicate with shamans and other religious experts, such as healers and diviners. During one festival they feed the great birds food and drink and then release them with messages to take back to their masters in the clouds.[19]

Traditional healers or curanderos in the Peruvian Andes draw their power to diagnose and heal from the relationship each has with his or her mountain deity. The highest and most powerful healers, the *alto mesayoq*, are chosen by the *apu* through a dramatic sign: usually that of surviving two lightning strikes high on a mountain ridge – the first to kill them, the second to restore them to life. Certainly a harder and more rigorous path than the one a medical student follows to become a doctor. When curanderos treat their patients, they ask them first who their *apu* is, since everyone, not just traditional healers, has one on a nearby sacred mountain. A Peruvian curandero asked an Argentine woman who had come to him for treatment what mountain she could see from her home. When she said she lived on the flat plains far from the sight of any mountains, he replied, "You must be in Hell!"

The importance of mountain deities for society at large becomes apparent in the key role they play in women's lives. *Apus*, who are always masculine, watch over and protect livestock, both wild and domestic, including vicuñas, alpacas, and llamas. Before getting married, a woman symbolically marries her *apu*, since women are pastoralists who traditionally take care of their flocks under

the protection of mountain deities. Men, on the other hand, are agriculturalists who till and farm the land, so they symbolically marry the female earth goddess, Pachamama. These symbolic marriages happen when a woman inherits her first flock and a man gets or builds his first house. A curandero in Cuzco told me that the most important marriage for a woman is her marriage to her *apu* since her human husband represents the mountain deity she symbolically marries. And similarly for a man, whose wife stands for Pachamama.[20]

Myths and legends from various parts of the Andes reveal sacred mountains acting in a number of different roles. The theme of a great flood found as far north as Alaska extends down South America to Patagonia. According to a tradition recorded in Peru at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a llama learned that in five days the ocean would cover the earth. When his herder became angry at him for not grazing, the animal reproached him, saying, "How can you worry about such things when the world is about to end?"

Alarmed by the news, the man asked what he could to save himself. The llama suggested that he and his wife take five days of food and climb a mountain called Huillcacoto. Clustered together on top, they found a number of other animals. As the llama had predicted, the ocean rose and covered all the other mountains, except for the summit of Huillcacoto. After five days the flood receded, and the herder descended with his wife and the animals to repopulate the world. In other traditions from the Inca period, the peak chosen as a place of refuge keeps growing in height in order to stay above the rising waters.[21]

In Patagonian versions of the flood myth, people become mountains. According to the Araucanians of southern Chile, an evil serpent named Cai Cai created a flood to exterminate the human race. Despite the efforts of a friendly snake, who saved many people by helping them reach the tops of mountains, a number of warriors perished. When the waters receded, Cai Cai turned their bodies to stone, and they became the spectacular spires of Fitzroy and the Towers of Paine. The Araucanians regard themselves as the descendants of the lucky people helped by the friendly serpent. Few of the modern climbers who come to make some of the most difficult rock climbs in the world realize that they are jabbing their pitons and ice axes into the backs and bellies of mythic warriors.

Elsewhere in the Andes, people turn into mountains in myths and legends that have nothing to do with floods. A story about the Cordillera Blanca tells of an Inca warrior named Huáscar who came to the range and fell in love with Huandi, the beautiful daughter of the local chieftain. Her father, an avowed enemy of the Incas, disapproved of the alliance and forbade her ever to marry the handsome young man. When the two lovers attempted to run away, he set out in pursuit with his warriors and captured them. Enraged at what they had done, he had them taken up to the heights and bound to rocks, where they

froze to death in sight of each other. Huáscar became Huascarán, at 22,205 feet the highest mountain in Peru, and Huandi was transformed into the neighboring peak of Huandoy, 20,981 feet high. The tears they shed for love of each other turned into the glaciers and streams that flow down from the heights where they died. And, indeed, viewed in the right way, the great white bulk of Huascarán has the broad and muscular appearance of a man while the graceful pyramid of Huandoy possesses the more slender and feminine qualities of a woman.[22]

Chimborazo

If people can turn into mountains, then mountains can have human descendants. A number of myths make prominent Andean peaks the ancestors of the tribes or groups who live near them. According to local traditions, Chimborazo, the highest mountain in Ecuador, married Tungurahua, a shapely female volcano. Jealous of his bride's affections and suspecting her of infidelity, he attacked Carihuairazo and Altar, two lesser peaks who had also courted her. Their shattered ridges and truncated appearance bear witness to the blows that the jealous husband inflicted upon them. The Puruhá, who inhabited the region between Chimborazo and Tungurahua at the time of the Spanish conquest, believed themselves descended from the union of the two volcanoes.[23]

Bulging out of the surrounding landscape like a huge snow-capped blister of exuded ash and lava, Chimborazo rises to 20,564 feet above sea level. Although more than 8,000 feet lower than Mount Everest, because of the equatorial bulge caused by the spinning of the globe, it is the highest mountain in the world measured from the center of the earth, its summit the point on the planet closest to the stars. Until the early part of the nineteenth century, Europeans, in fact, thought it was the highest mountain above sea level, and a number of them tried to climb it. In 1802 the German scientist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt, reached 19,413 feet, blocked from going all the way to the summit by an enormous crevasse. His writings about his explorations and research in South America excited readers back in Europe and made him the most famous scientist of the nineteenth century, crowned with the mistaken belief that he had gone to a higher altitude on the mountain than anyone had ever gone anywhere in the world. In 1880, Edward Whymper, the English mountaineer who made the first ascent of the Matterhorn, finally completed the climb to the summit of Chimborazo.

Shortly after his attempt on Chimborazo, Humboldt met Simón Bolívar, the future Liberator of South America, in Paris and helped to inspire the young Venezuelan's keen interest in nature and mountains. Many years later, in 1822, at a critical turning point in his military campaign to free the Spanish colonies from Spain, Bolívar found himself in what is present-day Ecuador and

composed a mystical prose poem titled "My Delirium on Chimborazo," which may or may not have been based on an actual experience on the most famous mountain at the time in South America:

> I wanted to climb the watchtower of the universe. I searched for the tracks of La Condamine and Humboldt; I followed them boldly, nothing held me back; I came to the glacial region, the ether suffocated my breath. No human foot had trod on the diamond crown that the hands of Eternity had placed on the lofty temples of the dominator of the Andes. I said to myself: this mantle of Iris that has served as my banner has marched in my hands across infernal regions, crossed rivers and seas, and climbed over the gigantic shoulders of the Andes; the land has flattened itself at the feet of Colombia, and time has not been able to hold back the march of liberty. . . . And seized by the violence of a spirit unknown to me, that seemed to me divine, I left behind the tracks of Humboldt, making my own blemishes on the eternal crystals encircling Chimborazo. I arrived as if driven by the genius that animated me, and I grew faint touching with my head the crown of the firmament: I had at my feet the threshold of the abyss. A feverish delirium seized my mind. I felt as if lit by a strange and superior fire. It was the god of Colombia who possessed me.

In this influential work of literature, revered in much of South America, Bolívar's visionary ascent of Chimborazo became for him, and many others, a sacred symbol of the revolutionary war of independence and the new republic of Gran Colombia that he was seeking to found and whose first president he became, before it broke up into the separate countries of today, including the modern nation of Colombia.[24]

Ausangate

A large number of religious beliefs and practices, both pre-Columbian and contemporary, have collected around the snow-fluted precipices of Ausangate, an impressive massif 20,945 feet high that dominates the Vilcanota range southeast of Cuzco. One of the most important sacred mountains in the Andes today, Ausangate has a recorded history that goes back to the pre-Columbian period. Because of its height and location near their capital, the Incas regarded it as a major shrine, and the emperors would make offerings of gold and silver to it. When Pachacuti, the founder of the Inca empire, was campaigning to the north, two comets were said to have shot forth from Ausangate to announce the impending death of his father.[25]

The people of the Cuzco region still regard Ausangate as the seat of the supreme *apu*, greatest of all the mountain gods. In their rituals they always invoke it before the other mountains of the area. Some believe that the influence of the

peak extends to the distant capital of Lima, where the apu caused legislators to pass a national law prohibiting the killing of vicuñas that graze wild on the slopes of high mountains under his protection. The deity himself keeps to the heights of Ausangate, aloof from the petitions of ordinary mortals. He interacts with the world below through his principal servant, a mythical cat known as the *ccoa*, who flies through the sky, wrapped in clouds, spitting hail, urinating rain, and flashing lightning from its gleaming eyes. People describe it as having the appearance of a black puma with gold or grey stripes running down its back and a whip-like tail of brilliant colors. The *ccoa* of Ausangate has his lair in a magical palace hidden inside the mountain. There he stores crops that he has taken by force from villagers' fields. The way to this magnificent palace leads through the doorway of four lakes found at the foot of the peak. Sometimes the *ccoa* leaves food floating on their waters – colored red, green, milky white, and clear. Anyone who tries to retrieve this food is sucked beneath the surface, never to be seen again.[26]

Ausangate plays an important role in a contemporary religious festival that blends Inca practices with Catholic beliefs – the mountain pilgrimage of Qoyllur Rit'i, the "Star of Snow." Around the beginning of June, thousands of people gather in a high valley beneath glacier-laden peaks fifty miles east of Cuzco. Many of them come as dancers playing flutes and dressed in feather headdresses to represent lowland Indians from the jungle. Others have white knitted masks embroidered with the faces of llamas; called *qollas*, they play the llama herders of the highlands. The smallest but most important group wear sack cloths hung with shaggy black wool; they are the *ukukus*, the bear people, descended from the mythical marriage of a bear and a woman.

Shortly after midnight the *ukukus* rise to the shrill sound of whistles and start off in a long procession, climbing up through a silver landscape of moonlit mountains. In the sharp cold of the icy air, their breathing forms little grey clouds that waver like ghosts before their faces. Only they, the *ukukus*, have the power to overcome the spirits of the dead who haunt the heights, condemned for their sins to carry burdens of ice. Climbing in sinuous lines, they enter the realm of the eternal snows, reaching the glaciers with the first glimmer of dawn. There, at over 16,000 feet, they place a wooden cross in the ice and light candles on the snow, and as the sun rises toward the dark horizon, they pray to Jesus and the mountain gods.

Their ritual done, the *ukukus* cut chunks from the glacier and carry them down, back to the villages from which they have come. The ice, the people believe, has medicinal properties that derive from the mountain itself – the mountain that draws moisture up from the jungles below and sends it down in rivers to water the land and keep humans and animals nourished and healthy. The pilgrims regard the snow peak at the head of the glaciers as an integral part of Ausangate, the most important mountain deity east of Cuzco. There, according to local belief, dwell the spirits of the dead, condemned to remain

within Ausangate's eternal snows, awaiting salvation. As the pilgrims climb up to the glacier, they worship the god of the sacred mountain for the fertility and nourishment he bestows on the living.

The name Qoyllur Rit'i, the "Star of Snow," suggests an astronomical connection, and the festival does indeed coincide with the emergence of the Pleiades from beneath the horizon after an absence of several months. Robert Randall, a researcher who has studied the pilgrimage in detail, notes that the Incas regarded the reappearance of this cluster of stars in the night sky as an important event marking the return of fertility to fields that had lain fallow since the last harvest. They called the period when the Pleiades were hidden below the horizon the time of "sickness." This would accord with the other part of the festival's name, Rit'i or "'snow," referring to the medicinal ice brought down from the glaciers – ice whose healing water brings fertility and nourishment to the land and its people. As a supernatural mixture of human and animal, the *ukukus* who gather this ice have the ability to enter the dangerous realm of the spirits and bring back the blessings of the mountain gods, led by the supreme *apu* of Ausangate.[27]

Mount Kaata

Living in a remote region relatively uninfluenced by Christian missionaries, the Qollahuaya people of northeastern Bolivia have developed an especially intimate relationship with the mountains on which they live, viewing them as living beings with human bodies like their own. The Qollahuaya divide themselves into groups called *ayllus*, each one of which identifies itself with the particular mountain on which it lies. Nearly three months after he had come to do research on the isolated *ayllu* of Mount Kaata, a villager took an American anthropologist named Joseph Bastien aside and revealed the key to understanding his people's religious life and social organization. Standing high on the slopes of Kaata, he said:

> The mountain is like us, and we're like it. The mountain has a head where alpaca hair and bunchgrass grow. The highland herders of Apacheta [the upper region] offer llama fetuses into the lakes, which are its eyes, and into a cave, which is its mouth, to feed the head. There you can see Tit Hill on the trunk of the body. Kaata [the main village, in the middle] is the heart and guts, where potatoes and oca grow beneath the earth. The great ritualists live there. They offer blood and fat to this body. If we don't feed the mountain, it won't feed us. Corn grows on the lower slopes of Niñokorin [the lower settlement], the legs of Mount Kaata.[28]

The people of Kaata feed its body in order to keep it vigorous and healthy. The strength and well-being of the *ayllu* and its individual members depends, they feel, on the figure and health of Mount Kaata. The sacrificial blood that the

ritualists pour on earth shrines embodies the life principle that animates the mountain so that it can produce food for the people who farm its slopes. The llama fat that they stuff into holes and caves gives Mount Kaata the energy it needs to remain strong and productive, insuring the health of humans and animals. The diviners of Kaata, renowned for their healing powers, treat sickness as the consequence of mudslides, erratic water flow, and other problems afflicting the body of the mountain itself.

The view of Mount Kaata as a human being underlies and unifies almost all aspects of Kaatan religious and social life. During the year that he lived in the *ayllu*, Bastien took part in twelve rituals having to do with birth, marriage, sickness, death, and farming. Every one of them was based, in one way or another, on the underlying concept of the mountain as a human person intimately involved with the individual and collective life of its people. Diviners cured sick patients, for example, by performing rituals that symbolically healed Mount Kaata by putting its bodily parts back together in a healthy whole. People chose husbands and wives from communities at different levels of the mountain in order to preserve and embody its integrity in their marriages. Agricultural rituals fed the body of Mount Kaata so that it would, in turn, nourish the potatoes and corn planted in its soil and feed the herds of llamas grazing on its grass.

The identification of the *ayllu* with the human body of Mount Kaata has bound the various communities of the mountain together into a single cohesive unit based on a deep sense of intimate relationship with the natural environment. Over the centuries the people of Kaata have drawn on the power of this conception of themselves and their place in the world to resist repeated efforts to break up the unity of their land and society. In 1592 a Spanish governor took over the lower level of Mount Kaata and made it his personal estate. Arguing that the various levels belonged together as parts of the mountain's body, the Kaatans finally convinced the authorities to return the expropriated land to them in 1799. Their struggle to maintain the integrity of Mount Kaata and its *ayllu* has persisted to the present day. Even after modern political and economic developments have split up their communities, the people of Kaata continue to perform rituals that feed the sacred mountain and bring them together in a human body invisible to outsiders.[29]

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

Standing as a compact mountain range isolated from, but close to the Andes, the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta rears up in a triangular cluster of peaks capped with glaciers to tower over the warm waters of the Caribbean in northern Colombia. Two of its summits, Pico Cristóbal Colón and Pico Simón Bolívar, each nearly 19,000 feet high, are not only the highest mountains in the country, they are also the highest coastal mountains in

the world. Rising from tropical jungle to arctic heights, the Sierra Nevada contains a sampling of nearly all environments and ecosystems found elsewhere, forming a world complete in itself. Scattered among the ridges and ravines rumpling its slopes lie hidden the stone terraces and ruins of an ancient civilization – the Tayrona.

Four Indigenous tribes descended from this civilization – the Kogi, Wiwa, Arhuaco, and, to a lesser extent, the Kankuamo – still live on the Sierra Nevada and continue the traditions and practices they have inherited from their ancestors. They follow what they call the "Law of Origin" or the "Law of the Mother," which requires them to maintain a spiritual and ecological balance with the natural environment of the Sierra Nevada. If, for example, they cut down a tree to build a bridge, they pay back nature by planting and taking care of a sapling of the same species. Priests known as *mamas* live in the region of sacred lakes at higher altitudes where they practice meditation and come down to lower altitudes to perform rituals focused on guiding the life of the community and making sure that equilibrium with the natural world continues.

The tribes – in particular, the Kogi, the most traditional tribe – revere the Sierra Nevada as the sacred "Heart of the World," on which the health and wellbeing of the entire earth depends. In the words of a *mama*:

> The essential sacred dimension of our planet is watched over and cared for in the Sierra Nevada; it is the base and nexus of the spiritual dimension of the planet, the umbilical cord that unites the origins and the present, where spiritual concerns and material things meet; this is where we join with Mother Earth. Our inheritance of the lands of this territory and the knowledge of their significance has bestowed on us the title of Elder Brothers.[30]

Driven ever higher by outside encroachment, seeking to maintain their traditional way of life and livelihood, the *mamas* have become increasingly alarmed by the destruction of the environment and changes in climate clearly visible in the rapid retreat of glaciers on top of their sacred mountains. Diminishing snowmelt has had a cascading effect, desiccating the alpine tundra that feeds the rivers and streams that sustain life in the lower altitudes of the Sierra Nevada where the tribes have their villages. As the Elder Brothers and guardians of the Heart of the World, the *mamas* have sent out a warning to the rest of us, whom they call the Younger Brothers, to recognize the harm we are doing and stop the environmental degradation and global warming that are threatening not only the welfare of the Indigenous people of the sacred mountain range, but the future of all humanity and the earth itself.[31]

Beliefs and practices directed toward sacred mountains provide important keys for understanding the past and the present. They help to explain the two

most intriguing enigmas of South American archaeology – the reasons for laying out the Nazca Lines and choosing the site of Machu Picchu. Along the southern coast of Peru, spread over an area of eighty square miles, extends a mysterious network of animal figures, geometric shapes, and long straight lines, traced on the surface of a desert plain. Many of these figures are so large that they can only be seen in their entirety from high in the air, leading to fanciful theories that they functioned as signs for alien spacecraft. Based on his study of current Andean practices, Reinhard has proposed that the Nazca Lines, which date back to 200 BCE, were laid out to draw water down from mountain gods. Many of the straight lines point directly toward sacred peaks, and in parts of the Andes people follow similar pathways up to the tops of mountains to invoke deities for rain. The figures themselves appear to represent birds and animals that act as messengers of mountain gods, such as condors and the supernatural *ccoa* of Ausangate. According to Reinhard's hypothesis, the Nazca people would have created the representations to attract the attention of such messengers flying overhead on their way back to their masters on sacred mountains.[32]

Fifty miles northwest of Cuzco, on a narrow ridge suspended between snow-capped peaks and the Amazon jungle, lies the most spectacular archaeological site in the Andes: the abandoned city of Machu Picchu. When I rose at dawn to visit the ruins, a long white cloud filled the gorge of the Urubamba River far below like a glacier, while jungle-covered ridges around and above us

Figure 17 Morning mist flows over the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu with the peak of Huayna Picchu in the background. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

stood etched clearly against a smooth sky. As the sun rose from behind snow peaks to the east, diaphanous wisps of grey flowed up from the valley to arch over and swath the terraces, walls, and buildings of Machu Picchu in a translucent veil of mist. The main temple with the altar to the sun, set on a high point, emerged from the glowing fog. At the far, culminating end of the ridge, standing like a sentinel over the site, the slender peak of Huayna Picchu with its jungle slopes shone green above the blurred ruins of houses and temples. Gradually, as the mist burned off and vanished into the air, the rest of Machu Picchu appeared, beautiful and mysterious, like a vision of reality materializing out of a dream.

Since its discovery in 1911, scholars have wondered why the Incas chose to build this extensive complex of houses, temples, and terraces in such a remote and difficult location. What purpose could it have served? As Reinhard notes in a recent study, Machu Picchu sits on a ridge that descends from Salcantay, 20,574 feet high, one of the two most important sacred peaks in the Cuzco region – the other being Ausangate. Around the ruined city, situated at the four points of the compass, stand the rock peak of Huayna Picchu and three snow mountains revered by the local populace – Pumasillo, Veronica, and Salcantay. In the gorge below, the Urubamba, a sacred river carrying the waters of Salcantay, nearly encircles the site of Machu Picchu, completing the prerequisites needed to make it a ceremonial center. The main altar of Machu Picchu, a blade of rock called the Intihuatana, mimics the distinctive shape of Huayna Picchu, suggesting that it represents a mountain deity invoked in Inca rituals. The summit of the peak overlooking the city itself has artificial platforms similar to those found on higher mountains, such as Llullaillaco in Chile, where the Incas performed ceremonies to control the weather. All these factors provide powerful evidence that the worship of mountain gods may have played a major role in determining the location and purpose of Machu Picchu.[33]

In many parts of Latin America, pre-Columbian beliefs and practices, especially those concerning mountains, have survived by assuming guises acceptable to ecclesiastic authorities. Gods of sacred peaks have become Christian saints. The people of Peru and Bolivia who speak the Quechua language of the Incas worship Illapa, the Inca god of storm and war associated with mountain heights, as Santiago or Saint James. Practices devoted to Pachamama, goddess of earth and mother of mountains, continue in the name of the Virgin Mary. According to beliefs of Inca provenance, the souls of the dead go to dwell in idyllic villages blessed with pleasant weather inside Mount Coropuna, one of the highest and most important sacred peaks in southern Peru. Today the Quechua people of the region believe that Saint Peter stands guard over the entrance to the spirit world concealed within the slopes of the pure white mountain.[34]

A similar blending of pre-Columbian and Christian beliefs underlies some of the most important shrines in Mexico and Central America. In 1531, ten years after the fall of the Aztec Empire, a Catholic convert had a vision of the Virgin Mary on a hill sacred to Tonantzin, Our Lady Mother, goddess of earth and fertility. There, on the site of a temple dedicated to the Aztec deity, the Church built a chapel that became the holiest shrine in Mexico – that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, just north of Mexico City. The image of the Virgin on the hill of Tepeyac functions as a national symbol, unifying the people of Mexico in a spirit of freedom and religious faith. Each year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims come to her shrine to invoke her love and help. Elsewhere, in mountainous areas such as the Chiapas Highlands of southern Mexico, Christian crosses placed on the summits of sacred mountains mark the entrances to heavens ruled by Mayan gods. Beneath these crosses, the people believe, lie the subterranean realms of the earth lords and ancestral spirits responsible for the fertility of their crops and the fate of their souls.[35]

Even Catholic priests feel drawn to the heights of Latin American mountains, but for reasons that have little or nothing to do with pre-Columbian beliefs and practices. When I began climbing in Ecuador in the 1960s, one local cleric had developed a certain renown for ascending high peaks on Sunday and saying Mass on their summits. He would go up mountains like Cotopaxi, the highest active volcano in the world, with a portable altar strapped on his back. Standing in the snow, surrounded by clouds at 19,347 feet above sea level, he would put on his vestments, set out the wafers and wine, and conduct a service for anyone who happened to arrive on the summit. Having invoked God close to heaven, he would conclude the Mass and greet his transient flock with a flurry of startling obscenities.

Inspired in part by Biblical images of Moses on Sinai and the transfiguration of Jesus on Tabor, a number of Catholic clergy find spiritual uplift in Andean mountaineering. At 19,000 feet in a windstorm on the upper slopes of Chimborazo, I encountered a group of Jesuit novitiates who needed help descending. We tied ourselves together on a rope, and I led the way down. Coming to an icy section, I yelled at them to stop and put on their crampons. I sat down to strap mine on, but they kept descending. "There's no problem, it's easy," said one, just before he hit the ice and went shooting past me, to be caught by the rope. When I asked him why he had not stopped to put on his crampons, he replied, "We didn't bring any."

Assuming that God would take care of them, he and many of his colleagues went up into the mountains without the proper equipment or skill. Sometimes their quests to reach the heights of physical and spiritual experience ended in disaster. One group of priests and novitiates wandered up the glaciers of Antisana, a high peak east of Quito, without a rope. One of them stepped through the snow and fell into a hidden crevasse. He landed unhurt on a ledge,

but his companions had no way of hauling him out, so they left him there and went down to get help. When they returned with a party of rescuers, they could not find the crevasse: they had not thought to mark it, and a snowstorm had completely transformed the surface of the glacier. The priest died alone with his God, and, like the mummies left by the Incas, his body remains entombed in the mountain.

The mountains of Latin America continue to cast a mysterious spell. Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl, Chimborazo and Ausangate: these and other peaks draw tourists and climbers from all over the world. Few of these foreign visitors realize that many of the mountains they come to admire and climb are still worshipped as abodes of pre-Columbian gods. Where Buddhists and Hindus openly revere the snow peaks of the Himalayas, native Latin Americans keep their ancient beliefs and practices to themselves. The mysterious views of the Incas and the Aztecs remain alive, hidden on the heights of Mexico and the Andes. The persistence of pre-Columbian beliefs and practices, despite centuries of efforts to eradicate them, attests to the power of mountains to inspire a sense of the sacred under the most difficult and hostile circumstances. And it suggests that we may find this sense of the sacred hidden even in the most inhospitably secular ranges of the modern world.

ELEVEN

OCEANIA

Islands of the Sky

The mountains of Oceania rise over flat expanses of sea, desert, and jungle. As the only points to break the monotony of a horizontal world, their vertical shapes, silhouetted against the sky, excite the imagination. Emerging from the deserts of central Australia, monoliths of ancient stone evoke visions of a primordial world that existed at the beginning of time. Elsewhere, in moister regions of Oceania, green crags and peaks of volcanic rock burst forth from the Pacific, streaming with vegetation, the symbol of life. Fuming in the sky, the cones and clouds of erupting volcanoes make visibly manifest the awesome power of the sacred. Far off over sea and jungle, at the limits of sight, alpine peaks with glaciers gleaming in the mist stir the spirit with glimpses of strange and unexpected beauty.

Oceania is made up of four major regions – the continent of Australia and the island groups of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The mountains that hold the greatest interest for us lie in Australia and Polynesia. Of the two remaining regions, only Melanesia contains landmasses large enough to support peaks worthy of note. The largest island in Melanesia, New Guinea, hides deep within its jungles the highest mountain in Oceania – the mysterious Jaya Peak, formerly known as the Carstensz Pyramid, 16,024 feet high. This tropical snow mountain lies too far from inhabited valleys to carry much sacred significance for the nearest people, the Dani of Papua, who live at least five days' walk away. Other mountains of Melanesia, however, have assumed important roles in the

most distinctive religious phenomenon of the region – the emergence of millenarian movements called cargo cults.[1]

Beginning in the nineteenth century in response to the devastating impact of their power and wealth on Indigenous cultures, Europeans started to notice the proliferation of native sects predicting the end of white rule and the advent of a golden age characterized by an abundance of material goods. When American forces in World War II arrived with planeloads of supplies to fight the Japanese, a widespread belief developed that airplanes would return with cargo for the people, announcing the beginning of the millennium. On the island of Tanna in Vanuatu followers of the John Frum Church still climb the active volcano of Yasur to throw offerings into its crater as a means of speeding up the arrival of the blessed day. They believe that when their prophet John Frum comes from America with airplanes laden with goods, an army of 50,000 soldiers will emerge from within the mountain to establish the golden age. The charismatic person who founded the sect in 1940 drew his spiritual authority from the deity of the highest peak on the island.[2]

Like a number of other contemporary practices in Melanesia, cargo cults mix modern ideas with traditional beliefs in ancestral spirits, many of them said to reside in sacred mountains. A friend of mine, an American lawyer named Jeffrey Falt, went to Papua New Guinea in a government program to train native people in the practice of modern law. During a vacation one of his students took him to visit his home in the jungle. Pointing to a peak above the village, the student said, "That is our sacred mountain."

"What makes it sacred?" Falt asked.

"There is a special cave in the mountain. When someone is accused of doing something wrong, we go to meditate inside it. There we enter a trance, and the spirits tell us whether the person is guilty or innocent."

"But what about due process and the right to a trial? What about giving the accused a chance to defend himself?"

"Oh, yes, that works too," the student replied.

AUSTRALIA

Of all the continents Australia is the lowest and flattest, as well as the driest. Its highest mountain, Kosciusko in the Snowy Mountains of the southeast coast, reaches an altitude of only 7,310 feet above sea level. The low ranges that rim the continent and undulate through its flat interior reflect the extreme antiquity of Australia's rock, much of it laid down in the Precambrian period before life began. The long ages of erosion that have worn down these ranges into stubs of mountains have at the same time exposed some of the most spectacular geological formations in the world – great monoliths of ancient sandstone

that loom out of the deserts of central Australia, most notably Uluru and Kata Tjuṯa, formerly known as Ayers Rock and the Olgas.

The ancient people and culture of the continent mirror the primordial character of the land. Indigenous Australians migrated from Africa and Asia to Australia around 65,000 years ago, although many maintain their ancestors have always been there. They have preserved traditions that go back to the hunting and gathering way of life followed for thousands of years by prehistoric peoples throughout the world. Wandering back and forth across the continent, following the tracks of their ancestors, Indigenous Australians maintain networks of sacred sites that link them physically and spiritually to the land. These places of ritual importance include, as one among many, the great dome of Uluru.[3]

Uluru

Deep in the flat and desiccated interior of Australia stands the most impressive mountainous feature of the continent. An enormous monolith of reddish sandstone, Uluru looks like a huge red pebble half-buried in the bed of a dried-up pond. Rising to 2,831 feet above sea level, it has a length of 2⅓ miles and a width of 1⅔ miles. The sight of this extraordinary monolith, the largest isolated rock in the world, disorients the viewer: the eyes move back and forth, trying to ascertain the nature and proportions of what they see. Is it a boulder or is it a mountain? The extreme flatness of the desert, looking like a sheet of water shimmering in the noon-day sun, accentuates the abruptness with which Uluru bursts out of the earth to rise in one clean motion more than 1,000 feet above the surrounding plain.

Scoured clean of soil and vegetation, the impermeable surface of the monolith sheds nearly every drop of rain that falls on it, forming a ring of waterholes around its base. One of them, Mutitjulu, is the most reliable waterhole for thousands of square miles. Nourished by the water that runs off the rock, a fertile fringe of trees, shrubs, and edible plants, such as fruits and tubers, supports a large and diverse population of wallabies, emus, kangaroos, bandicoots, dingos, and other kinds of wildlife. Numerous caves and overhangs pitting the foot of Uluru provide shelter and protection, making the imposing monolith a gathering place for wandering bands of Indigenous Australians, who find food and water in plentiful enough supply to conduct elaborate rituals that require them to stay in one spot for an extended period of time.

The smooth curves and simple outline of the monolith evoke the timeless world in which the Indigenous Australians lived and continue to live – a world of unchanging repetitive patterns, ceaselessly echoing events of the primordial past. According to their traditions, in the mythic period of the beginning,

known as Tjukurpa or the Dreamtime, ancestral beings with supernatural powers roamed the earth, creating, as a by-product of their lives, the features of the landscape that we see today, including those of Uluru. Living like the humans and animals who came after them, subject to the same emotions of love and hate, these ancestral beings banded together, gathered food, fought, loved, and died. In so doing, they established the sacred laws and ways of life that Indigenous Australians have followed unchanged for thousands of years. At the end of the Dreamtime, the features that the ancestral beings gouged out of the earth in the course of their activities hardened to stone, and their bodies turned into distinctive boulders and piles of rocks that lie scattered like bones across the landscape they shaped – and continue to animate. The Indigenous Australians who continue to maintain their traditions believe that the supernatural heroes of the Dreamtime live on in present-day people whose individual lives are the timeless dreams of their primordial ancestors.

The Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara, the traditional owners of Uluru, read the features of the great dome of rock as Jews and Christians do the pages of the Bible. They see written in its cliffs and gullies a record of Dreamtime stories that express the beliefs and practices of their ancient traditions. In initiation ceremonies the men go to sacred caves and overhangs at the foot of the monolith to chant the primordial myths they find inscribed in natural shapes of living stone. Like the syllables of a Buddhist or Hindu mantra, the features of Uluru shimmer with supernatural power: by rubbing particular rocks, the Anangu, as the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara call themselves, believe they can awaken the life force of the ancestral beings preserved within them and draw directly on the magical potencies of the Dreamtime. If, for example, they feel hungry, they can rub the stones that embody the primordial ancestors of certain snakes, and the serpents will come for them to catch and eat.

The Anangu attribute the original creation of Uluru itself to the play of children. Two mythical boys shaped it out of soft earth left by a rainstorm. Then they went off to amuse themselves elsewhere, leaving behind a featureless mound of mud, which after further shaping hardened into the rock we see today. The significance of this seemingly trivial event lies not so much in what was done as in who did it and when: the fact that ancestral beings created it during the Dreamtime. By recounting the story, the Anangu evoke the reality of the sacred past and bring its power into the present, giving life and meaning to the world in which they live.[4]

Myths accounting for many features of Uluru involve bloody struggles between antagonistic groups of ancestral beings, typically to the death. When I visited Uluru in 2014, two Anangu men sketched out in diagrams on the sand one of these stories. The carpet snake people had been peacefully living on the south side of Uluru for some time when venomous snake warriors, who enjoyed making trouble, decided to attack them. They came slithering from

Kata Tjuta, a cluster of sacred domes to the west. The ensuing battle centered around Mutijilda – the largest and most important water hole at the base of Uluru. A carpet snake woman managed to hold off the advancing warriors – some of whom appear as desert oaks marching across the plain toward Uluru – with a digging stick she wielded at them and poison she spit on them until she was forced to retreat into Mutijilda gorge. The leader of the venomous snakes slashed her son with a stone knife, and he crawled up over the waterhole to bleed to death. The Anangu regard the pool and the stream feeding it as his blood, clarified and fit to drink. In times of drought they will call on him to release water from the source where he rests in death. Roused to fury, the carpet snake woman struck the leader of the venomous snakes such a great blow with her digging stick that she knocked off his nose, which fell to the ground and now stands as a pointed boulder some seventy feet high. Her mouth, wailing in grief for her son, appears as a wide cave on the side of the gorge. The bodies of other carpet snake people slain by the poisonous serpents lie in the silent forms of cylindrical stones scattered over the top of Uluru.[5]

The myths recorded in the natural features of the monolith continue to have significance for the Anangu. The refusal of the hare wallaby men to attend the ceremony of the mulga seed tribe explains, for example, why the descendants of the two peoples use different body decoration in their rituals. Individuals attribute their personal temperaments to events that happened in the Dreamtime, many of them on Uluru. After noting that he was identified with a mythical ancestor who had speared another, one genial old man remarked to a researcher, "I'm a proper cranky bugger." The cave where the hare wallaby men conducted their most important ceremonies still serves as a place of male initiation forbidden until recently to women under pain of death. Anangu would go there to cut their arms and smear streaks of blood on its sacred walls. Paintings on the rock depict in highly symbolic form stories of things that happened during the Dreamtime, events that young men must learn and understand in order to become adults.[6]

The Anangu regard themselves as custodians of the sacred sites on Uluru, entrusted with maintaining the ancient traditions connected with the monolith. The encroachment of the outside world has interfered with their ability to carry out these responsibilities, which give meaning and significance to their lives. After white Australians hunted them away from the vicinity of Uluru in the first half of the twentieth century, the national government expropriated the monolith, removing it from the preserve it had established for Indigenous Australians. As one of the two best-known natural features in Australia – the other being the Great Barrier Reef – Uluru had become a major tourist attraction, bringing the country international attention and foreign currency.

Concerned that growing numbers of tourists would desecrate sacred sites banned to all but initiates, the Anangu sought to regain control of the monolith.

In 1985, after years of frustration dealing with a legal system whose illogical complexities they had little interest in comprehending, they finally succeeded: the government returned ownership of Uluru to its traditional owners, the Anangu. They then leased it back to the state as a national park over which they maintained nominal control by having six of the ten positions on its board of management. Re-designation by UNESCO of the park in 1994 as a cultural as well as natural World Heritage site strengthened the role of the traditional owners in managing the monolith. Education programs and interpretative materials developed and implemented by the Anangu asking visitors not to climb Uluru out of respect for their culture and traditions succeeded in dramatically reducing the number of tourists climbing and desecrating the sacred site. In 2017, after the percentage of climbers fell below a threshold of 20 percent of all visitors, the management committee of the park voted to close Uluru to any further climbs, a ban that went into effect in 2019. Although tourists are still coming, swarming around the rock with cameras clicking and children shouting, Uluru now has a better chance of remaining a sacred place, a natural monument expressing the primordial power and traditions of the Dreamtime.[7]

POLYNESIA

East of Australia and Melanesia, the islands of Polynesia lie scattered across the ocean, ranging from Hawai'i in the north to New Zealand in the south. Like breakers flecked with foam or purple masses of clouds banked along the horizon, the mountains that give these islands their forms rise up over the blue swells of the dark Pacific. As they come into view, poised between sea and sky, they reveal the presence of bits of land that seem to drift on the waves like pieces of flotsam left by spurting hotspots of molten magma and the catastrophic collision of tectonic plates. The highest billow up into the enormous, isolated domes of great volcanoes, such as Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea in Hawai'i. Others in temperate regions to the south merge into each other to form the icy ranges of the New Zealand Alps.

The Polynesian people who migrated across vast expanses of the South Pacific used these mountains at the end of their journeys to guide them to their final destinations. Having come from Samoa, they reached the Society Islands around the end of the first millennium BCE. There, in central Polynesia, they split up into various branches. One sailed north to discover Hawai'i in about 100 CE and become the Native Hawaiians while another journeyed southwest to settle New Zealand as the Maori 1,000 years later. In myths about their legendary place of origin, the Maori appear to have taken with them the memory of a sacred mountain, an extinct volcano, located on the island of Raiatea, just west of Tahiti.

In ancient times Polynesians throughout the Society Islands believed that the souls of the dead journeyed to Raiatea, the religious and political center of the region, to climb the crater peak of Mount Temahani. There, on a ridge running along the rim of its summit, they came to a junction guarded by a god, who silently indicated the path destined for each to follow. Those of evil fate veered left and plunged from a heap of slag into the extinct crater of the volcano to enter the darkness of the underworld and suffer the torments of hell until purged and fit to become gods of the earth. The souls of the blessed, however, turned to the right and took a path that rose to a promontory on the heights of the mountain, from which they ascended to a fragrant paradise hidden in the sky.[8]

The ancient Tahitians called Raiatea, with its sacred peak, Havai'i, the name of the mythical homeland of the Polynesian people who had come to Tahiti from the island of Savai'i in the region of Samoa. When one branch of the Polynesians sailed to the islands of Hawai'i, they altered this name slightly and gave it to the largest Hawaiian island, an island dominated by the impressive volcanoes of Mauna Loa, Mauna Kea, and the active crater of Kilauea. For the Maori, the Polynesian people who went south to settle New Zealand, Havai'i became in their language Hawaiki, the land of the gods, the idyllic place from which their ancestors came. The mountains of this mythical land they saw reflected in the shining shapes of the snow-capped peaks they found deep in the southern reaches of the South Pacific.

Mountains of the Maori

The islands of New Zealand lie along a line that marks the contact between two tectonic plates – the Indian Australian and the Pacific. The pressure of these segments of the earth's crust squeezing together has produced the Taupo Volcanic Zone of the North Island and the Alpine Fault of the South Island. A series of snow-capped volcanoes, many of them venting steam, a few erupting with clouds of ash, release the intense heat accumulating beneath the surface of the North Island, where most of the present-day Maori live. The collision of tectonic plates in the South Island continues to uplift the precipitous ice ranges of the New Zealand Alps. Fed by moist clouds rising from the Pacific, immense glaciers have carved out deep valleys and fjords, leaving behind alpine peaks that have served as a Himalayan training ground for New Zealand climbers such as Sir Edmund Hillary, who with the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay made the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953.

Archeological evidence dates the first human settlement of New Zealand to sometime in the fourteenth century. Maori traditions maintain that their ancestors came even earlier in *wakas* or canoes from their sacred homeland of Hawaiki. When they first glimpsed the islands in the far blue distance, they

probably saw them as a line of clouds stretched over the mountains, like a vision of the earthly paradise they had left behind, guiding them across the sea to their new home. Accordingly, although first used only for the North Island, the Maori name for New Zealand today is Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud.

Beginning around 1200 CE the ancestors of the Maori people migrated in *wakas* from distant Hawaiki, their mythic paradise sometimes identified with the Polynesian island of Raiatea. When the Maori saw these islands with their immense mountains, so different from anything in their previous experience, their thoughts turned to Hawaiki. There, in the direction of the rising sun, on a sacred mountain named Hikurangi, lay the divine source of life, the earthly paradise where humans were first created and where the gods still dwelled, free from the afflictions of the mortal world. According to Maori traditions, the golden light of dawn, of eternal renewal, hung glowing about the summit of Hikurangi, a place of bliss beyond the reach of sickness and death. With this image in mind, the Maori named a number of mountains in New Zealand after the sacred mountain of their mythic homeland. The most prominent of these, Mount Hikurangis, stands on the northeast peninsula of the North Island. Its summit, 5,753 feet above the sea, is the first place in New Zealand to catch the light of the morning sun, replicating the role of its divine archetype in the distant paradise of Hawaiki.[9]

The Maori identify the mountains of Aotearoa as the petrified bodies and resting places of legendary ancestors and deities who sailed from Hawaiki or descended from the heavens. In some accounts, one of the canoes in which they came foundered in a storm and turned into a reef off the rugged coast of the South Island. The people who struggled ashore, wet and cold, went off in search of food and firewood. When the sun came up, many of them froze into forms of rock and ice and became the spectacular peaks of the New Zealand Alps. A popular story regarded as a fabrication for children accounts for the height of Aoraki or Mount Cook, the highest mountain in New Zealand, 12,218 feet high, by explaining that it was a man who was carrying a boy on his shoulders: the two froze into a peak taller than the other mountains. According to traditions of the Kai Tahu, the dominant tribe of the South Island, four divine sons of the Sky Father, Rakinui, came down from the heavens to visit the Earth Mother, Papatūānuku, and explore the empty southern ocean in their celestial canoe. At the end of their explorations, the eldest brother, Aoraki, started a chant to fly back home to the sky, but he faltered partway through and failed to complete the incantation. The canoe crashed down and turned over, forming the South Island of New Zealand. The brothers scrambled to the higher, western side and froze into Mount Aoraki and three other high peaks of the Southern Alps. For this reason, the Maori call the South Island Te Waka o Aoraki, the Canoe of Aoraki. Other stories say Aoraki was the tallest of four

brothers or was standing on a high point of the canoe when it foundered and turned into the mountainous features of the South Island. Traditions of the Waitaha, the first Maori tribe to settle the South Island, maintain that none of these stories are true: their people have always been there. For them Aoraki holds their prayers and is the supreme sacred mountain, as it does for other tribes of the South Island. In the words of a Maori saying, "If you must bow your head, then let it be to the lofty mountain, Aoraki."[10]

Maori associate the fiery energy of the volcanoes on the North Island with the *mana* or sacred power of legendary priests who migrated across the ocean from Hawaiki. Ngatoroirangi, one of these ancestral priests, had a particularly close connection with the volcanic peaks of Tongariro, an important sacred mountain. After living for a while by the coast, he took a retainer named Urohoe with him and journeyed inland to climb the snow-capped mountain and take possession of the lands he could see for his descendants, the people of the Ngati Tuwharetoa tribe. Buffeted by wind, sleet, and snow, he managed to reach the summit of one of it peaks. Ngatoroirangi was freezing to death and called out in desperation to his sisters in far-off Hawaiki: "O Kuiwai, O Haungaroa, I am seized by the cold wind to the south, send me fire!" From the words of his plea for help derives the name Tongariro where *tonga* means "south wind" and *riro* means "seized." Responding to his call, the two sisters came speedily lighting fires along the way, leaving a string of volcanic and geothermal eruptions behind them, from White Island in the Bay of Plenty to Rotorua to Tongariro itself. By the time their warming fire arrived, however, the retainer had either perished of cold or been sacrificed, depending on the version of the story, and the peak he had climbed became his grave, named Ngauruhoe after him. The smoke and fumes that that issue from vents and geothermal springs on the peaks of Tongariro bear witness to the power of Ngatoroirangi and the truth of his story.[11]

Another account tells of a legendary priest named Rakataura who died on the summit of Mount Te Aroha, the Mountain of Longing. He and his wife were traveling through the country, setting up shrines and laying claim to the land for their descendants. She passed away on top of a hill, and he went on to Te Aroha on the eastern boundary of the tribal territory he was establishing. Climbing to the summit, he gazed back in grief to where his wife had perished in the interior of the island and named one peak of the mountain Te Aroha-a-uta, "Longing for Inland Places." Looking the other way, toward the coast where he had left his children, he called another peak Te Aroha-a-tai, "Longing for the Sea Coast." Then, consumed by sorrow, he died, high above the sea and land.[12]

Maoris have particular reverence for mountains like Te Aroha where their ancestors died or are buried. The people of an *iwi* or tribe associate themselves with the mountain that is their ancestor or on which rest the remains

of those from whom they claim descent. The *mana* of these ancestors intensifies the power of peaks regarded as *tapu* or sacred. Maori make it a practice to place the bones of high-ranking men and women in caves hidden on the mountain identified with their particular *iwi*. Before going into battle, warriors would invoke the power of these ancestral caves. The Maori around Mount Pūtauaki, one of New Zealand's most prominent volcanoes, would take the bones of especially important people up to the summit and lower them into a crevice on top of the eastern peak, called Te Tatau o te rangi, "the Door of the Sky."[13]

In atmospheric phenomena taking place around the summit of the mountain associated with their ancestors, the anxious members of a tribe saw signs foretelling what would happen to them. If lightning angled away from the peak in the direction of the territory of a hostile group, that bode well for them and badly for their enemies. If, however, it stabbed straight down on the summit of their mountain, it portended defeat in battle or the death of their chief. A Maori chant laments the fearful sight of this sign of impending doom over Mount Tauwhare:

> See the lightning flashing in the sky,
> Splitting in two over Tauwhare!
> Oh alas, it is the sign of death.[14]

Like humans, whose behavior they reflect, mountains also squabbled and fought among themselves. Mount Taranaki fell in love with the beautiful Mount Pihanga, wife of Mount Tongariro. Tongariro flew into a rage and attacked Taranaki and other mountains with adulterous interests in his wife, forcing them to flee his wrath. Taranaki stalked off to the southwest, furrowing out the gorge of the Whanganui River with his massive body to come to rest finally as a handsomely pointed peak on the west coast of the South Island. Mount Putauaki headed northeast, toward the Bay of Plenty. He did not get very far, however, because one of his wives stopped to cook food, and when the sun rose, she and her husband froze in their places, transformed into stationary peaks of stone. This story of the dispersal of mountains in New Zealand bears striking similarities to stories of mountains quarreling and separating in North America – the myths of how Mount Rainier went across Puget Sound to get away from the other wives of Mount Olympus and how Mounts Saint Elias and Fairweather, once married and living together, broke up and moved apart.[15]

The phrases that Maori use to introduce themselves in intertribal gatherings reflect the degree to which they identify themselves and their tribes with the sacred mountains standing over their territories. People identify themselves by stating the name of their mountain, their river or lake, their people or tribe, and their chief, in that order, with the peak first, indicating its significance.

Members of the Ngati Tuwharetoa, for example, introduce themselves by saying:

> Tongariro is the mountain
> Taupo is the lake
> Ngati Tuwharetoa are the people (*iwi*)
> Te Heuheu is the man (paramount chief).

When a European missionary who had gained standing among the Maori had to speak at one of these gatherings, an elder gave him this phrase to identify himself in the proper ceremonial manner: "Zion is the mountain; Jordan is the River; Jesus Christ is the man." From the Maori point of view, Mount Zion represented the principal sacred mountain of the Europeans and Jesus the chief priest of their religion. Commenting on the intimate way in which the Maori identified themselves with their tribal mountains, one Western observer remarked, "At times it seems doubtful whether it is the tribe that owns the mountain or river or whether the latter own the tribe."[16]

After Captain James Cook visited New Zealand in 1769, Europeans began to colonize the islands. By 1887 they were threatening to buy up land from individual Maoris for grazing sheep on the lower slopes of Tongariro, the sacred mountain of the Ngati Tuwharetoa. The paramount chief, Horonuku Te Heuheu Tukino IV, feared that if Tongariro were cut up into parcels, it would lose its integrity and the *mana* or power he and his people derived from it would be diminished. To keep the mountain whole and preserve it as a sacred place, he worked out a *tuku*, an arrangement of shared responsibility, with the British Crown to make it into a national park. Tongariro National Park was officially designated in 1894 – the first national park in New Zealand and the fourth in the world, established only twelve years after Yellowstone National Park in the United States. The new park included the three volcanic peaks of Tongariro, Ngaurohoe, and Ruapehu – the latter sacred as well to the Ngati Rangi and Ngai Uenuku tribes. The role of the Ngati Tuwharetoa in management and governance was strengthened in 1993 when UNESCO inscribed Tongariro National Park as the first World Heritage site in a new category of Associative Cultural Landscapes singled out for the cultural importance of their natural features. Today the tribe is among the most prosperous in New Zealand, and the current Paramount Chief, Sir Tumu Te Heuheu, has played a major international role as Chairman of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. The words of his father, Sir Hepi te Heuheu, reveal the depth of feeling his people have for their sacred mountains, the first offspring of the sky and earth deities, divine ancestors of all life:

> We look upon them with deep respect and reverence and a tinge of many other complimentary emotions, pride certainly being one of them. Proud that they are ours (Te ha o taku maunga ko taku manawa – The breath of

> my mountain is my heart), and proud that they are bequeathed to the nation who as nature lovers accord them their deep respect. Our reverence for the mountains goes deeper in that in time, with the essence of our genealogies, all life forms originated from the same parents, Papa-Tu-A-Nuku, the Earth Mother and Rangi, the Sky Father, so that man and all other life forms are in harmony with one another in the bonds of kinship.[17]

The Tongariro Crossing, one of the most popular hikes in New Zealand, climbs up onto a plateau beneath the symmetric cone of Ngaurohoe and crosses over the summit of Tongariro, dimpled with craters, some of them filled with bright blue and green lakes of alkaline water. In recent years as many as 3,000 people a day do the one-day hike, creating unsafe overcrowding and environmental pressures that concern the Maori as a desecration of their sacred mountain. When I did the crossing in 1993, before the current surge in tourism, I encountered only a handful of fellow hikers and spent most of the day alone, immersed in the silent magnificence of the haunting landscape. Near the high point of the crossing, mist blurred the velvet-like layer of solidified ash coating the walls of the Red Crater, striking in the intense luminosity of its color. There was a smell of sulfur, pungent and strangely mouthwatering. As I watched, to my amazement, the mist thinned to reveal in the depths of the crater the Glory – my shadow projected as an angelic figure surrounded by a rainbow halo. Buddhist pilgrims climb Emei Shan in China to seek such a vision as the manifestation of the Bodhisattva from whom they are seeking blessings. It was the first time in my years of climbing and exploring mountains that I had seen the Glory – and it was here on a sacred mountain in New Zealand.

Figure 18 Hikers on Mount Tongariro with the volcanic cone of Ngaurohoe in the background. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Maori had lost nearly all their lands. Bereft of the very ground of their identity as a people, some turned to messianic movements that blended traditional ideas with Christian beliefs. In 1906 a charismatic Maori prophet named Rua Kenana announced to the Maori that the King of England would give him money to buy back their territory so that he could expel the British from New Zealand and establish a golden age. In anticipation of the impending millennium, Rua founded a utopian settlement on the forested slopes of Maungapohatu, a mountain on the North Island sacred to people of his tribe. He and his followers viewed their community as a New Jerusalem and constructed as their administrative center a round two-storied building patterned on the Dome of the Rock. They called it Hiona or Zion. The British government, however, was not prepared to wait for the Maori Millennium. In 1916 it sent police to arrest Rua and to climb the mountain, symbolically breaking the power of the movement.[18]

Although he never fully recovered his spiritual authority and died in 1937, his memory lives on among the Maori. When I interviewed one of his last living disciples, Naomi Teka, she told me that that she still believed in Rua. "There are two sons of God: Jesus is the son in heaven, Rua, is the son on earth. Rua will return someday on Maungapohatu," she said and added, "Maungapohatu is the doorway to heaven."

In recent years the government of New Zealand has taken steps to acknowledge the rights of the Maori, promote their language, and encourage a revival of their traditional values. The profound sense of identity with their land and their ancestors that sacred mountains embody for the Maori is beautifully expressed in the words of a contemporary writer and artist, Harry Dansey. Musing on the prospect of dying and being buried with his forefathers, the descendants of those who came from Hawaiki in a legendary canoe called Arawa, he writes:

> For we will be in the heart of our own land, in the midst of our own people, which is the only place for the dead to lie. North is Mokoia, grey-blue in the mist; east is Whakapongakau, hill of the longing heart; south is Moerangi where the sky sleeps and Te Tihi-o-tonga, peak of the south; and west is Ngongotaha with the lightning flashing its salute to death on the mountain's gaunt flank. For this is the land of Arawa and we are her people.[19]

Kilauea and Mauna Loa

Like the ancestors of the Maori who sailed south to New Zealand, the Polynesians who went north to Hawai'i found large islands crowned with enormous mountains, far higher and more impressive than any they had

known in the places from which they came. The great rounded mass of Mauna Kea, 13,796 feet high, rises some 33,000 feet from the ocean floor, making it the highest mountain in the world – measured from its base to its summit. Near it, sharing the Big Island of Hawai'i, the craters of Mauna Loa, the most massive mountain in the world, and Kilauea, one of the most active volcanoes in the world, frequently boil and surge with red fountains and streams of molten lava. Elsewhere, on islands such as Maui and Kaua'i, fantastic knife-edged peaks and ridges smoothly draped in gleaming foliage shoot up from the dark Pacific, conjuring up incredible images of alpine ranges encased in green veneers of velvet ice.

The beauty and power of these magical mountains made them a natural abode of deities, an earthly equivalent of Havai'i, the legendary paradise of the Polynesian gods. With thoughts of such a place in mind, the ancestral Hawaiians who came from the region of Tahiti named the largest island, the one with the highest peaks and active volcanoes, Hawai'i. In the green heights of this and the other Hawaiian Islands they saw the haunts of deities such as Kane, the foremost of the ancient Hawaiian gods. A prayer to him in his various forms opens with the words:

> O Kane of the great lightning,
> O Kane of the great proclaiming voice,
> O Kane of the small proclaiming voice,
> Silently listening in the mountains –
> In the great mountains,
> In the low mountains . . .[20]

Of all the deities associated with mountains, however, the most lively and charismatic is Pele, the fiery goddess of volcanoes. A late arrival to Hawai'i, having come long after the elder gods, such as Kane, she sailed across the ocean from a homeland called in many sources Kahiki, the Hawaiian name for Tahiti, although the word seems to refer more to an earthly paradise than a geographical place. A chant that records the myth of her coming tells us:

> From Kahiki came the woman, Pele,
> From the land of Pola-Pola [Bora Bora],
> From the red cloud of Kane,
> Cloud blazing in the heavens,
> Fiery cloud-pile in Kahiki.[21]

According to certain versions of the myth, Pele had to leave her original home because of disputes with other members of her family. Some attribute her departure to a disconcerting habit she had of setting fire to things that belonged to her relatives. Other accounts say that she had to flee Kahiki to escape the wrath of a jealous sister who suspected Pele of having seduced her husband.

Like the legendary ancestors of the Maori, who also left the region of Tahiti on account of family disputes, Pele sailed across the Pacific in a divine canoe, accompanied by a band of devoted followers composed mostly of friendly relatives. Whereas most of the mythical immigrants to New Zealand froze into mountains, she took up residence inside a volcano and remained alive as the goddess who embodied both its form and power. Pursued by her vengeful older sister, she traveled from island to island, searching for a new home. In each place she dug a great hole with her spade or divining stick, creating the volcanic calderas that pit the Hawaiian Islands from Kaua'i in the northwest to the Big Island of Hawai'i in the southeast. The route that she took coincides with the geological order in which these islands flamed into existence as the earth's crust moved over a hotspot of molten magma. Every time she attempted to settle down in a new crater, seawater would enter to flood it and put out the fires she had started. Haleakala, an extinct volcano 10,023 feet high, presented a different kind of problem: according to one version of the myth, Pele tried it out but found it too large and drafty to keep comfortably warm. At that point her sister caught up with her and in a savage struggle tore her body to bits, creating a hill in Maui known as the bones of Pele. But the spirit of the goddess survived this assault and soared into the sky to appear transfigured in fire above the summits of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa on the Big Island of Hawai'i. There, beside the impressive bulk of Mauna Loa, Pele finally found a permanent home for herself in the active craters of Kilauea, some 4,000 feet above the sea, beyond the reach of its fire-extinguishing waters.[22]

The appearance and temperament of the goddess match the complex and contradictory nature of the volcano she inhabits and animates. Like the graceful fountains of fire and sinuous flows of lava that issue from the craters of Kilauea, Pele can take the form of a beautiful maiden possessed of seductive charms, made even more enticing by the aura of danger that glimmers around her lovely face and tantalizing body. Appearing in this form, often as a mysterious stranger, she causes mortal men to fall in love with her and burn in the fires of her passionate embrace. Like the unpredictable lava flows that spill out from her crater, suddenly turning to consume houses and fields in their paths, the goddess has a fickle and terrifying nature: she can change in an instant from an alluring young woman to a hideous hag enveloped in flames. Although Native Hawaiians fear her destructive power and call her the Eater of Land, they also revere Pele as a beneficent goddess whose lava flows have created the fertile soil of their island homes and whose divine heat energizes their spirits with the fire of life.[23]

Mortals who challenge Pele do not do well. A typical story tells of a Hawaiian chief who sported with Pele and beat her in a number of games. Growing overconfident and boastful, he presumed to surf on the fiery waves of

lava that surged across the crater of Kilauea. When Pele objected to his desecration of her home, he expressed his contempt for her by riding his surfboard standing on his head. Angered by his impudence, the goddess caused the wave he was poised on to tilt and break. He plunged into the molten lava and perished, punished for his boastful presumption.[24]

The most dramatic and beautiful of the rituals dedicated to Pele is the performance of the hula. A blend of poetry, music, and religion, these graceful dances ceremonially evoke and reenact the primordial stories of the gods, especially those associated with the fire goddess. Specially trained and initiated into their art by teachers versed in sacred knowledge, performers of the hula sing songs traditionally taught long ago to worshippers of Pele by the divinities of her entourage. In performing the most sacred dances, they seek to become one with the deity of the particular dance, usually Laka of the upland forest or Hi'iaka, the sister of Pele. A misstep indicates that the goddess has abandoned the dancer, leaving him or her to stumble in the ordinary world of clumsy mortals.

A hula dedicated to Pele depicts events from the account of how the goddess came to Hawai'i. Given the importance of the story in Hawaiian religion and mythology, it was performed with great solemnity before the highest chiefs of the islands. Unlike most other hulas, the dancers in this one danced without instrumental accompaniment, evoking the power of the goddess with dignified gestures. Until recent eruptions in 2018, many of the traditional schools that train students in performing the hula today went up to the caldera of Kilauea to dance on the rim of Halema'uma'u – the crater regarded as the abode of Pele herself – and make offerings to the goddess, often to obtain her blessings before a contest or major performance.

Of all the traditional deities, Pele is the one who has most successfully survived the conversion of Hawai'i to Christianity. Today many native and nonnative Hawaiians, including Christians, Buddhists, and followers of other religions, believe in the goddess – or else take no chances by doing anything that might offend her if she should turn out to exist. Pele was originally of concern mostly to the people who lived near her fiery abode in the active volcanoes of Kilauea and Mauna Loa, but with the fading away of many of the other gods, devotion to her as a major deity spread to other parts of Hawai'i. A belief that she has a special interest in protecting and helping native Hawaiians in general helped to gain her a more widespread following throughout the islands.

Trifling with the goddess can have serious consequences. In 1935, over the objections of believers in Pele, army aircraft bombed a flow of molten rock that was advancing from Mauna Loa on Hilo in an effort to keep it from reaching the city. They succeeded in diverting the lava, but a few weeks later six of the men who had participated in the bombing died in a midair airplane collision.

Figure 19 Dancers perform ritual Hula dances at Halema'uma'u crater, the abode of Pele on Kilauea. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

And on their way back to relatives on the mainland, the ashes of one of them mysteriously vanished. The followers of Pele blamed both events on the wrath of the goddess. Even relatively minor infractions can lead to a spate of bad luck attributed to Pele. Many tourists who have innocently picked up pieces of lava on Kilauea and taken them home as souvenirs have found themselves the victims of an uncanny string of accidents. The National Park Service at the volcano regularly receives packages containing such rocks with instructions to please return them to Pele.[25]

As the seat of Kilauea and Mauna Loa, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is closely connected in Hawaiian tradition and the public imagination with Pele and her relatives. Recognizing the sacred importance of the park, the superintendent, Jim Martin, invited a committee of *kupunas* or Native Hawaiian elders to advise him and his staff on matters of cultural concern. The Kupuna Committee expressed strong interest in replacing a painting of Pele by an

Anglo in the visitor center with a more traditional portrayal of the goddess. The existing work of art lacked any reference to Hawaiian traditions and depicted Pele with a Western face and hair on fire blazing yellow so that she looked like a blonde surfer from California.

I was directing the Sacred Mountains Program of The Mountain Institute, working at the time with Hawai'i Volcanoes. On hearing about the interest of the Kupuna Committee, we provided funding that made it possible for the park to put out a call for submitting traditional paintings of Pele in a competition to replace the painting in the visitor center. The two main newspapers in Hawai'i, based on a different island, published front-page articles on the project. In no time art stores on the Big Island were sold out of supplies, and the park was flooded with "a tsunami of art." They had been expecting a dozen or so paintings and received more than 140 submissions, forcing park staff to work twelve-hour days processing the submissions, a task many of them found the most meaningful work of their careers.[26]

The Kupuna Committee chose a painting with mythic references depicting Pele according to Hawaiian tradition as a Polynesian woman with a calm, compassionate expression, holding an egg symbolizing her creative powers and stirring lava around her with a ceremonial staff. The Volcano Art Center next to the visitor center had planned to display the remaining paintings but had room for only fourteen, so the main hotel and the geology museum joined in hosting a month-long exhibit of sixty-seven of the submissions titled "Visions of Pele." The competition and exhibit generated a great deal of excitement and energized the Native Hawaiian community, infusing them with additional pride in their traditions.[27]

Mauna Kea

Pele's shifting, multifarious nature blazes forth in a story that pits her in a cataclysmic struggle against Poli'ahu, the snow goddess of Mauna Kea. Once Poli'ahu and her companions came down from her mountain to engage in the ancient Hawaiian sport of sled racing on a grassy hill. Pele appeared in the form of a beautiful stranger and joined them in their races. When she found herself losing, she became jealous and caused the earth to turn warm with the heat of an impending eruption. Recognizing the mysterious stranger as Pele, Poli'ahu fled toward the summit of Mauna Kea, pursued by fingers of lava that grabbed at her mantle of snow and started to melt it. The goddess snatched her robe free and cast it over the rest of her mountain. In the great battle that ensued between the goddesses of fire and ice, the island shook with earthquakes, mountains rocked, and great cliffs came crashing down. As Poli'ahu gradually prevailed, her mantle of snow descended upon the crater of Kilauea and froze Pele's fountains of burning lava to stone, sealing off the passageways through

which the molten rock emerged from beneath the earth. Forced to exit elsewhere, it streamed out into the ocean, where it formed the rocky mass of Laupahoehoe and the great arch of Onomea. Defeated by the cold power of her rival from the higher mountain of Mauna Kea, Pele had to settle for control of the southern half of the Island of Hawai'i, where she remains today in possession of the active volcanoes of Mauna Loa and Kilauea.[28]

In addition to viewing its summit snows as the glistening abode of the snow goddess Poli'ahu, many Native Hawaiians consider Mauna Kea their most important sacred mountain – the realm of their deities and their divine ancestors. They revere it as the place where the Sky Father, Wakea, and the Earth Mother, Papahanaumoku, separated from their passionate embrace to create the space that allowed the Hawaiian Islands and the human race to come into existence. According to traditional accounts, the first born of the divine couple were Mauna Kea and the progenitors of the Hawaiian people. In the words of an important creation chant:

> Born of Kea (Wakea) was the mountain (mauna).
> The mauna of Kea budded forth.
> Wakea was the husband,
> Papa was the wife.
> Born was Hoohoku, a daughter,
> Born was Haloa, a chief,
> Born was the mountain, a mountain-son of Kea.
> . . . . . .
> Wakea returned to the sky seeking a wife.
> Wakea mated with Papa,
> The sun was born to Wakea,
> A sacred off-shoot of Wakea,
> The growth of Wakea was Wakea's own.
> The mountain was born, the sacred firstborn of Kea.[29]

Some traditions hold instead that the Island of Hawai'i is the first-born of Wakea and Papa and that the sacred mountain is the *piko* or symbolic navel or umbilical cord of the island itself, connecting the earth to the sky. In the Hawaiian language, *mauna* means "mountain" and *kea* means "white," yielding the usual translation of Mauna Kea as the "White Mountain." However, as the chant suggests, Mauna Kea can also be interpreted in more traditional terms as short for Mauna a Wakea, the "Mountain of Wakea," the heavenly father of the Hawaiian Islands and the Hawaiian people.

An array of cinder cones with tiny craters pockmarks the broad dome of Mauna Kea, looking like empty eye sockets gazing vacantly at an empty sky. When winter snows melt away in spring and summer, the red ash and rock of the rumpled summit glow at sunrise and sunset with a supernatural light. Regarding it as a place of awesome power and magnificence, few Hawaiians

in the past dared venture up to the top of the mountain. Only those with the stature and knowledge to conduct the proper ceremonies would presume to go there, some to deposit the *piko*s or umbilical cords of newborn babies. Numerous shrines and altars, as well as oral histories, show evidence of ancient practices, including burials of important members of the nobility such as chiefs and priests. No longer the exclusive province of the ruling class, many of these practices continue to this day, practiced by Hawaiians with ties to the sacred mountain.[30]

Near the highest point, cupped in a crater, rests Lake Waiau, considered by many the most sacred site on Mauna Kea. According to tradition, it holds the water of Kane, the highest of the ancient Hawaiian deities. Because of the depth of its sanctity, Hawaiians view the lake as bottomless, connecting the sea to the summit of Mauna Kea, from which life-giving waters come in rain clouds and springs to sustain the people of the Island of Hawai'i. In the words of Kealoha Pisciotta, president of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou, the leading organization dedicated to protecting the sacredness of Mauna Kea:

> Lake Waiau is considered among other things to be a doorway into the Po (the Heavenly Realms of the Ancestors). It is said this is [where] the water of the sea and the water of the sky meet. The Lake is like a navigational gourd to view the heavens in, as the stars are reflected on its surface . . . The snow, ice and waters of lake Waiau (or other pooling water areas, like those that occur on Pu'u Pohaku) are very valued because they are gathered for medicinal and other ceremonial uses and purposes.

Reinforcing the importance of Mauna Kea as a sacred place revered for its life-giving waters, the three principal goddesses of the mountain embody three different forms of water: Poli'ahu is the snow that covers the summit, while one of her sisters, Lilinoe, is the mist that envelopes the heights and her other sister, Waiau, is the liquid form that fills the lake bearing her name.[31]

The smooth, dry air flow coming over thousands of miles of flat ocean, the absence of dust and light pollution, and the altitude above much of the atmosphere make the summit of Mauna Kea one of the best places on earth for placing telescopes with the power to probe far into the distant reaches of the universe. In 1967 construction began on the first of what would eventually be thirteen or fourteen observatories on top of the mountain, impinging on nearby shrines and sites. From the beginning, well before the first observatory came online in 1970, Native Hawaiians objected to the desecration of their sacred mountain, but at the time they had little voice in the process of approving the project – their language, which had been banned in schools, did not even become an official language of the State of Hawai'i until 1978. As more observatories sprang up like white mushrooms on the summit, threatening endangered species and marring pristine views of Mauna Kea, environmental groups and concerned citizens of the city of

Hilo lent their support to the growing strength of the Native Hawaiian protests. In 2006 the combined forces won their first victory: preventing the construction of six small Outrigger Telescopes intended as extensions of the existing Keck Observatory.

Just a few years later a consortium of universities and research institutes from several countries set in motion a project that would galvanize Native Hawaiians and environmentalists as never before and bring the sacredness of Mauna Kea to the attention of millions of people outside the Hawaiian Islands. The proposed Thirty Meter Telescope, or TMT, with a mirror ninety-eight feet in diameter would be one of the largest telescopes ever made and would allow astronomers to see 100 times farther and more clearly than any previously existing telescope, including the Hubble Telescope in space. Its range of viewing would bring scientists closer to answering important questions about the nature and origin of the universe. The TMT would also dwarf the structures already in place on the summit of Mauna Kea. The dome housing the ninety-eight-foot mirror would be eighteen stories high and would require the construction of five acres of roads and nearly one-and-a-half acres of additional buildings. The complex would lie very close to three of the main historic shrines on the sacred mountain, only 225 feet from the closest one, interfering with religious practices carried out there and elsewhere on the summit.[32]

After going through a permitting process that began in 2010, backers of the TMT held a groundbreaking ceremony in 2014, only to have it interrupted by protestors, as well as legal and environmental objections. A series of escalating protests, gaining ever more supporters and swelling media attention, followed, complete with partial blockades of the access road to the summit of Mauna Kea and arrests of Native Hawaiian elders and others. Numerous articles about the controversy pitting science against Indigenous Hawaiian culture appeared in national international, and scientific publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and *Scientific American*. Partly in response to this media attention and questions about contested hearings, the courts vacillated between delaying the project and allowing it to proceed. In 2018 the Supreme Court of Hawai'i finally ruled in favor of the TMT, and in 2019 the governor of the state gave his approval for construction to proceed. In open defiance of his orders, protestors, including Native Hawaiian elders, flocked to Mauna Kea and set up encampments on the road, blocking access to all observatories on the summit. Fearing accusations of police brutality, the governor refrained from attempting to forcibly remove the blockades. As of 2020, the ensuing stalemate was continuing to hold up construction, and backers of the project had begun considering a possible move to distant site on the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean.[33]

In the meantime, the developing protest movement expanded well beyond efforts to keep the TMT from desecrating the summit of the sacred mountain. After the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, lands

belonging to the Crown and a temporary Republic of Hawai'i were ceded without compensation to the United States government. When Hawai'i attained statehood in 1959, the title of these ceded lands, which include the upper reaches of Mauna Kea, was transferred to the state to hold in a public trust. The University of Hawai'i was entrusted with managing astronomy on Mauna Kea and subleased sites on the summit to observatories for a nominal fee of one dollar per year. Each of the observatories, in turn, were free to sell viewing time on their telescopes for however much they chose, and some have charged a dollar per second, earning as much as $30,000 a night. Native Hawaiians, many of whom maintain the summit belongs to the Hawaiian people as their rightful heritage, have received none of this money, adding financial insult to the defilement of their sacred mountain. By focusing attention on the issue of the loss of ceded lands, highlighted in the desecration of the summit of Mauna Kea, opposition to the TMT has become a powerful symbol fueling a larger movement to restore sovereignty to the Indigenous people of Hawai'i.[34]

At a deep level the controversy over telescopes on Mauna Kea pits Native Hawaiians against astronomers in a conflict between two different systems of sacred values – traditional and scientific. Native Hawaiians revere the mountain as a temple that puts them in touch with the deities who created and control the cosmos. As Kealoha Pisciotta has written:

> The summit of Mauna Kea represents many things to the Hawaiian People. The upper regions reside in the Wao Akua, the realm of the Akua-Creator. It is also considered the Temple of the Supreme Being.[35]

For astronomers the observatories on the summit of Mauna Kea function as their equivalent of temples, allowing them to probe more deeply into the first moments of creation in the Big Bang and to understand better the laws controlling the subsequent expansion of the universe. Their research addresses, from a scientific point of view, some of the most widespread and important themes of traditional myths in cultures around the world. How did the cosmos come to be and where is it going? What is our place in the world and the universe? Where did we come from and where are going? Many astronomers regard the scientific knowledge acquired through the TMT and other telescopes on Mauna Kea as the highest form of truth – for them an ultimate or sacred value that takes precedence over objections to the desecration of the summit. Native Hawaiians, on the other hand, regard the traditional knowledge revealed in beliefs and practices on Mauna Kea as the highest truths, which they see as threatened by the construction of the TMT. The conflict between these sacred values has engendered strong feelings on both sides, although some astronomers out of respect for traditional views feel the

observatory should not be built and some Native Hawaiians are in favor of the project and the knowledge and benefits it will bring.[36]

Whatever happens with the turmoil roiling its summit, the tallest mountain in the world, visible from far away, high above the seething waves of the sea, will remain a steady, reassuring presence. As a well-known Hawaiian proverb says about the sacred mountain, "Mauna Kea, standing alone in the calm."[37]

Throughout Oceania we see cultures clashing over the heights of sacred mountains. In Australia Indigenous Australians struggle to preserve the integrity of their Dreamtime sites on Uluru from the degrading effects of tourism. In New Zealand the Maori turn to ancestral mountains as symbols of their identity with the land taken from them by English settlers. In Hawai'i native groups fight to protect the sacred summit of Mauna Kea from desecration by the construction of one of the largest telescopes in the world. All pit traditional cultures against dominant values of the modern world.

Although they arise from pain and despair, these conflicts over the status of sacred mountains have beneficial effects. Like the peaks themselves, visible from far away, they raise into view the beliefs and practices of traditional cultures previously submerged beneath waves of colonialism and modernization. Because their natural beauty and spectacular appearance attract the attention of the outside world, the mountains of Oceania provide opportunities for native peoples to make their concerns widely seen and heard. Visitors who come to view sacred places such as Uluru and Kilauea come, whether they intend it or not, into contact with other views of reality. These views force modern technological civilization to take cognizance of the existence of Indigenous cultures and to begin to make room for their traditional ways of life.

PART II

THE POWER AND MYSTERY OF MOUNTAINS

TWELVE

THE SYMBOLISM OF SACRED MOUNTAINS

Now that we have looked at mountains of major significance in cultures around the world, what conclusions can we draw about the symbolism that makes them sacred? On the most general level, we can identify from our study three broad ways in which people hold mountains in special regard. Firstly, certain peaks are singled out by particular cultures and traditions as places of sanctity directly linked to their highest and deepest values and aspirations. These mountains – the ones traditionally known as sacred mountains – have well-established networks of myths, beliefs, and religious practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and devotion. Primary examples include Mount Kailas in Tibet, associated with the spiritual goals of liberation and enlightenment, and Tai Shan in China, connected for millennia with the cult of emperors.

Secondly, mountains that may or may not be revered in themselves are frequently associated with revered persons, such as yogis, prophets, and teachers, or contain sacred sites and objects, such as temples, monasteries, hermitages, stones, springs, and groves. Great numbers of people, for example, visit pilgrimage shrines located in mountainous regions, such as the Hindu temple of Badrinath in the Indian Himalaya or the monasteries and hermitages of Mount Athos in Greece. Singling out this role of mountains, a passage in the *Mahabharata*, the great epic of ancient India, describes a Himalayan peak as a "refuge of hermits, treasury of sacred places."[1]

Thirdly, mountains in general commonly awaken in individuals a sense of wonder and awe that sets them apart as places imbued with special meaning and beauty, frequently spiritual in nature. Many tourists, hikers, climbers, poets, and artists today are drawn to mountains such as the glaciated peaks of the Alps in Europe, the great rock walls of Yosemite in the United States, and the pine-draped crags of Huangshan in China for aesthetic and spiritual inspiration and renewal, often enshrined in works of literature and art. Such mountainous places function for them personally as sacred or inspirational mountains, whether or not they have status as traditional sacred sites for anyone else. As the writings and influence of well-known conservationists such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau demonstrate, views of mountains as places of inspiration and renewal helped give rise to the environmental movement in the United States and have played a key role in galvanizing public support for the preservation of nature.

On a more specific level, our survey of cultures around the world reveals a bewildering variety of views of sacred mountains. People of different traditions revere hills and peaks as places of revelation, centers of the universe, sources of life, pathways to heaven, earthly paradise, abodes of the dead, temples of deities – the list goes on and on. As a well-known scholar of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade, has remarked, "The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless."[2]

What do we make of this kaleidoscope of shifting and sometimes contradictory views? Do they exist as a jumble of unrelated visions, each a powerful view in its own right? Or do they harmonize in an underlying theme that brings them together and resolves their differences? Eliade attempted to reduce this welter of disparate views of sacred mountains and sacred centers to variations on a single, universal theme or archetype – most notably the idea of the mountain as a cosmic axis that stands at the center of the universe, linking together the various levels of existence, from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven. This approach has a powerful appeal, responding as it does to a desire to find unity in the midst of diversity. Many religious traditions, particularly those influenced by Indian conceptions of the cosmos arranged around the axis of Mount Meru, do tend to view sacred peaks as centers of the universe. We have only to think, for example, of Mount Kailas in Tibet or Gunung Agung in Bali.[3]

The attempt to find a central axis in every sacred mountain, however, runs into a host of exceptions that require ingenious, and even tortured, efforts to force them into a single archetype – efforts that often ignore the ways in which the people who venerate mountains actually view them. What do we do with an important peak such as Mount Sinai, which lies off in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem, the center of the world in the Jewish and Christian traditions? Or with the four sacred mountains that define the outer limits of the Navajo

land? In China, the Middle Kingdom where we might expect a central location to be emphasized, the most important of the five imperial peaks is not Song Shan in the center, but Tai Shan in the east. Sometimes a mountain is sacred precisely because it lies on the edge of things, in a realm of inscrutable mystery far from the center of anything. Similar arguments of exceptions apply to other archetypes, such as considering every sacred mountain a place chosen for political or sociological importance. What do we do, for example, with Mount Kailas, which lies far from any center of political power?

The attempt to reduce all views of sacred peaks to one universal theme or archetype, no matter how comprehensive it may seem, actually limits the power of mountains as symbols. No single theme has the breadth of expression needed to include the incredible range and diversity of what mountains represent for people in different cultures and traditions. Just as one of the blind men in a well-known Eastern parable mistakes the trunk of an elephant for the entire animal, if we try to identify every mountain with a cosmic axis, for example, we run the danger of mistaking what is symbolized for one of its symbols. The very diversity of views that seems to confound our efforts to find a common theme offers us the opportunity to expand and enrich our appreciation of mountains and the full range of their symbolism.

MOUNTAIN THEMES

Although no single, universal theme underlies them all, the many disparate views of mountains form more than a random collection of unrelated images. They come together in patterns that help to highlight and clarify the principal roles that sacred peaks play in different cultures. Many of them express particular facets of a few basic themes that we find distributed around the world – the mountain as center, heaven, source of water, place of the dead, and so forth. Just as we get an overall impression of a peak by walking around it and viewing its faces from different angles, we can deepen our understanding of sacred mountains by examining some of the most important of these views or themes and examining the ways in which they relate to each other. In the course of my research on sacred mountains, I have identified ten themes that are particularly widespread in cultures around the world.

Height

When we look at a mountain, the first thing to impress us is usually not its central location, but its height, which evokes an immediate response of wonder and awe. Poised above the surrounding landscape, set in a fluid realm of drifting clouds and flowing sky, its summit appears to float in another world, higher and more perfect than the one in which we dwell. The names of numerous

mountains reflect the impact that the grandeur of their height has made on the people who revere them. The Koyukon Indians who live near the highest mountain in North America, call it Denali, "the High One." Mountains such as Tai Shan in China and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem that do not have great altitude are viewed spiritually as towering over physically higher peaks. As the highest mountain on earth, Mount Everest has assumed the status of a sacred mountain in the secular, modern world. Its summit symbolizes for many the highest goal one can strive to attain, whether one's pursuit be material or spiritual.

Many mountains derive their sanctity from the heavenly associations of their height. Reaching up above the clouds, cut off from the world below, their summits become imbued with the celestial attributes of heaven on high. The Odyssey describes the top of Mount Olympos as a divine realm of light and bliss, shining with the purity and perfection of the sky itself. Gazing up at their heights, cool and serene above the heat and dust of the desert, the ancient Chinese called the range of peaks running along the northern branch of the Silk Route the Tian Shan, the "Mountains of Heaven." The Kikuyu of Africa worship Mount Kenya as Kere-Nyaga, the "Mountain of Brightness," referring to the brightness of the supreme deity who dwells on the summit of the sacred mountain high in the sky.

Center

The view of the mountain as center is one of the most widespread and powerful of all the views we have encountered. It appears in its most comprehensive form as a central axis linking together the three levels of the cosmos – heaven, earth, and hell or the underworld. Just as the center defines and orients the circle, this axis gives stability and order to the universe around it. As the link between heaven, earth, and hell, it acts as a conduit of power, the place where sacred energies, both divine and demonic, spew into the world of human existence. The most elaborate and influential view of the sacred mountain as cosmic axis appears in Hindu and Buddhist visions of Mount Meru or Sumeru rising more than 80,000 miles from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven, surrounded by island continents floating in a vast ocean.

Other versions of this theme conceive of the sacred mountain as the center of the world, a country, or a local region. More than any other place, even the ocean, the view from the summit of an isolated peak offers a concrete sensation of feeling ourselves placed in the very middle of the world, enclosed within the vast circle of the horizon around us. Some cultures incorporate this kind of experience into a bodily metaphor, referring to a central mountain like Gunung Agung in Bali as the "Navel of the World." The ancient Greeks situated the most famous version of such a navel, the *omphalos* or center of the

ancient world located with the Oracle of Delphi on the sacred slopes of Mount Parnassos. Many cultures, particularly in Southeast Asia, view the capital of a king or emperor as a mountain situated in the center of the realm. Seated on the summit of such a mountain, the ruler can draw power and authority from the deity who resides there – and whom he or she often incarnates in human form. The country god of Khumbu resides on the summit of Khumbila, a relatively small peak that stands in the middle of the Sherpa homeland in the Himalayas just south of Mount Everest. There, where he can survey all of Khumbu, he watches over the Sherpas and protects them from evil.

Power

Many sacred mountains are revered as places of awesome power manifested in various ways – natural, supernatural, and even political. Hawaiians regard the eruptions of Kilauea as powerful, fiery manifestations of the goddess Pele, who dwells inside the volcano, a source of both blessing and calamity. Kakugyo drew directly on the power of Mount Fuji when he stood immobile in a cave inside the peak in an effort to bring peace and order to a nation rocked by civil wars. King David chose Jerusalem on Mount Zion to be his capital as a place of political power unifying the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The five principal sacred mountains of China enshrined the authority of the emperor to rule over the four quarters of his empire, supported by the mandate of Heaven. Frequent storms made the jagged peaks of Mount Olympos a dramatic setting for vividly displaying in thunder and lightning the supreme power of Zeus, king of the gods. Fearing a loss of the *mana* or sacred power of his tribe embodied in Tongariro, the Paramount Chief of the Ngati Tuwharetoa entered an arrangement of shared responsibility with the British Crown to make the mountain a national park as a way of preserving its integrity.

Deity or Abode of Deity

As places of power and heavens on high, mountains serve as abodes of gods and goddesses, often situated at the center of the cosmos, world, or region. Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction and archetypal practitioner of yoga, sits in a state of meditative bliss in a paradise on the summit of Mount Kailas. Zeus, king of the gods, holds court in his heaven perched on the peak of Mount Olympos. Nanda Devi, the goddess of bliss, dwells in a golden pagoda on top of the mountain that bears her name. Sometimes the deity blends with his or her abode, making it difficult to distinguish the two. A poem from the earliest collection of Japanese poetry refers to Mount Fuji as "a god mysterious."

As deities or abodes of deities, mountains frequently play important roles as divine guardians or protectors. Like the gods of many other peaks in Tibet and Himalayan border areas, the "country" god of Mount Khumbila is revered as a warrior deity who watches over the Sherpa region of Khumbu, warding off the forces of evil. In the Bible the mountains that surround the holy city of Jerusalem, where God makes his presence manifest in the sanctuary of the Temple Mount, become symbols of divine protection. In the words of the 125th Psalm:

> As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,
> So the Lord is round about His people from this time forth and forever.[4]

Temple or Place of Worship

Mountains often appear in the form of temples housing the deities who reside on or within them. Tibetan texts describe Mount Kailas as the pagoda palace of Demchog, visualized in the center of a *mandala* formed by the peaks and valleys that encircle the mountain. The Hopis view the San Francisco Peaks as an enormous *kiva* holding their *katsinas* and ancestral spirits. Hindus believe that yogis with supernatural sight can discern a golden temple where the goddess of bliss resides on the shining summit of Nanda Devi.

As centers and high places open to the sky, mountains provide altars for making offerings to gods and spirits. Chinese emperors chose Tai Shan as the exalted place to perform sacrifices thanking heaven and earth for the success of their dynasties. The Eka Dasa Rudra sacrifice, one of the greatest and most impressive of all religious ceremonies, occurs once a century on the slopes of Gunung Agung, the sacred mountain of Bali. To test Abraham's faith, God commanded him to offer up his son on the summit of Mount Moriah, before having him slay a ram instead.

Mountains may take the form of places of worship, viewed or imagined as shrines, churches, and cathedrals. Here a deity does not necessarily reside in or on the peak, but rather the mountain provides a special setting for communing with a divine presence through prayer, ritual, or contemplation. Just as Christians revere churches as sacred places of worship but do not regard them as objects of worship, so the same applies to mountains for many followers of monotheistic religions. The view of mountains as places of worship plays an important role even in modern secular societies. John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club and a key figure in the genesis of the modern-day environmental movement in the United States, wrote of Cathedral Peak in the Sierra Nevada of California that he would climb it "to say my prayers and hear the stone sermons."

People also venerate mountains as shrines commemorating the activities of saints and deities. Pilgrims climb Adam's Peak to worship at the footprint left by

the Buddha, Shiva, Adam, or Saint Thomas – the particular choice depending on the religion to which the worshipper belongs. Catholics revere Croagh Patrick as the place where Saint Patrick began his mission in Ireland by performing the miracle of banishing snakes. Every feature of Uluru recalls some event performed in the primordial Dreamtime by the human and animal ancestors of the Indigenous Australians.

Paradise or Garden

Modern societies share with traditional cultures the widespread view of mountains as sacred gardens and earthly paradises. The monks of Mount Athos call the sacred mountain and peninsula on which they live the "Garden of the Mother of God," – an earthly paradise where they can cultivate their gardens and perfect their souls in an atmosphere of peace and harmony. The Daoists of ancient China viewed the Kunlun Mountains as the site of a garden with the peaches of immortality. The Muslim Kirghiz of western China believe that the snows on the summit of Muztagh Ata, one of the highest peaks in the Pamir, conceal an earthly paradise that goes back to the time of the Garden of Eden. As the writings of the American conservationists like John Muir show, many in the modern world view the untrammeled environments of mountains as pristine equivalents of the Garden of Eden that preserve the purity of creation. One of the most popular destinations for visitors to Mount Rainier National Park in the United States, for example, is a flowering meadow close to the glaciers, named, significantly, Paradise.

Ancestors and the Dead

Whether revered as heavens or feared as hells, mountains have a widespread and important role as hallowed places of the dead. The Hopi believe that the spirits of many of their ancestors have gone to dwell inside the San Francisco Peaks. According to the Chinese, the souls of all the dead are gathered at the foot of Tai Shan, where the god of the sacred mountain passes judgment on them. The Kirghiz of western China looked up to the great ice dome of Muztagh Ata as the tomb of Ali and other important saints of Islam.

The resemblance of mountains to tombs, which often mimic the shape of hills, make them natural places of burial. The largest and most impressive graveyard in Japan lies on top of Mount Koya, where Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, is interred, waiting, it is said, to emerge from a meditative trance of suspended animation. The Japanese called the tombs of their ancient emperors "mountains," and even today villagers will refer to a coffin as a "mountain box." Many Jews ask to be buried on the slopes of

the Mount of Olives across from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, there to await resurrection at the coming of the messiah.

In seeing mountains as abodes of the dead, people often regard them as the places from which their ancestors came – or as those ancestors themselves. The Lepchas of Sikkim trace their mythical origins back to a primordial couple born from the glaciers of Kangchenjunga, the great Himalayan peak behind whose veil of ice they go when they die. The Puruhá in the Ecuadorean Andes claimed descent from a sexual union between the masculine mountain of Chimborazo and the feminine peak of Tungurahua. The Maori of New Zealand view many of their mountains, including Aoraki or Mount Cook, as the petrified bodies of ancestral heroes who came to the islands on migrations from the legendary land of Hawaiki.

Identity

As divine ancestors, mountains provide many societies with their identity and cohesiveness. Each Maori tribe derives its *mana* – the sacred power that holds it together – from its ancestral mountain, the petrified form of the deity or legendary progenitor from whom they are descended. Aoraki, the highest peak in New Zealand, "represents the most sacred of ancestors, from whom the Ngai Tahu descend and who provide the tribe with its sense of communal identify, solidarity and purpose." At intertribal gatherings Maoris ritually identify themselves by first stating their tribal mountain, followed by their river, or lake, and then their tribe and chief, in that order.[5]

Mount Fuji functions as a well-known symbol of Japanese national identity, highlighted in the famous block prints by Hokusai, including the most famous of all, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa." The Armenian people regard Mount Ararat, a volcano in eastern Turkey believed to be the site of Noah's ark in the Bible, as the symbol of their religious and cultural identity. Mount Rainier stands out for many residents of the Pacific Northwest as the omnipresent icon defining their part of the country: the mountain appears in the logos of numerous organizations and companies around the cites of Seattle and Tacoma.

Source

People throughout the world look up to mountains as sources of innumerable blessings, sometimes attributed to the ancestral spirits dwelling within them. For many cultures the most important of these blessings is water. The people of the Andes pray to the deities of the high peaks to shower their fields with life-giving rain. Both the Japanese and the Hopi rely on ancestral spirits who reside in mountains to provide them with the water they need to grow their crops.

Hundreds of millions of people in India revere the Himalayas as the divine source of their sacred rivers, on which they depend for their very existence.

Other blessings that flow from sacred mountains include fertility, health, and well-being, as well as treasures of various kinds. Elderly women climb Tai Shan to make offerings for grandchildren if their daughters or daughters-in-law have been infertile. Navajo healing rites make use of medicine bundles made with soil gathered from the peaks of the four directions. In Europe there is a long-standing tradition of putting sanatoriums, particularly for tuberculosis, on mountains, based on the idea that the mountain air and environment have special curative properties. As the writings of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Muir show, much of the modern appreciation of mountains derives from the perception of them as sources of health and well-being. Cultures around the world regard sacred peaks as prime places to find medicinal herbs with special powers to heal. The name Kangchenjunga means the "Five Treasuries of Great Snow," referring to material and spiritual treasures said to be stored in its five summits.

Revelation, Transformation, Inspiration, and Renewal

As places of power, close to heaven, mountains serve as dramatic sites of revelation, transformation, inspiration, and renewal. In perhaps the most famous and powerful example of the sacred mountain as place of revelation, God descends in a cloud of fire and smoke to reveal the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. In a very real sense Islam begins on Mount Hira when Muhammad hears the first words of the Qur'an and sees the Archangel Gabriel. The Plains Indians of North America climb hills and peaks in quests for visions of power to protect and guide them through their lives. Poets like Wordsworth and Shelley have experienced mountains as symbols of the infinite from which they have drawn poetic inspiration, while artists and photographers like Hokusai and Ansel Adams were inspired to create their greatest works of art by views of mountains like Fuji and the peaks and valleys of the Sierra Nevada.

The revelation or vision on a mountain often transforms the person who receives it. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, his face shines with a divine light. Jesus is transfigured on Mount Tabor where God reveals him to be his chosen son. A Plains Indian returns from a successful vision quest with the power to heal and accomplish incredible feats. Japanese practitioners of Shugendo climb sacred peaks in order to purify themselves and acquire supernatural powers. In China mountains with their solitude and grandeur are regarded as such ideal environments for meditation and transformation that the Chinese expression for embarking on the practice of religion means literally "to enter the mountains." Hermits of traditions around the world seek out

mountains as places to transform themselves through practices of physical austerity and spiritual contemplation.

Poets and mystics have visualized the ascent of the sacred mountain as a symbol of the ultimate pilgrimage, leading to the heights of heaven and the final goal of spiritual realization. At the end of the *Mahabharata*, the great epic of Indian literature, the hero, Yudhishthira, decides to leave the world and crosses the Himalayas to ascend Mount Meru. On the slopes of the cosmic mountain, he meets the king of the gods, who puts him through a series of tests before taking him to heaven and the final attainment of a celestial body. In climbing a mountain like Omine, Japanese practitioners of Shugendo imagine themselves passing through the stages leading to the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment.

For lay people who do not aspire to the supreme heights of spiritual transcendence or enlightenment, mountains serve as places where they can find inspiration and renewal. Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim pilgrims climb Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka to recharge their spiritual batteries from contact with the sacred footprint on its summit. Buddhists and Hindus make the arduous pilgrimage to Mount Kailas to glimpse the abode of the gods and acquire merit for a good rebirth. Irish Catholics walk barefoot up the painful path of Croagh Patrick as an act of penitence for their sins that will cleanse their souls and fill them with renewed faith in their religion. Millions of people, secular as well as religious, go to mountains like the Alps and the Sierra Nevada to seek physical and spiritual renewal – and a revived vision of what is truly enduring and worthwhile in life.[6]

Other views of sacred mountains relate to the ones outlined above. As points of high ground, often associated with sacred centers, mountains stand out as places of creation and re-creation in numerous flood myths. In Greece the summit of Mount Parnassos, situated just above the *omphalos* or center of the world, was the first place to emerge from the waters that covered the earth. There Deucalion disembarked from a boat to create a new race of Greeks from stones that he and his wife tossed over their shoulders at Delphi. A similar, but better-known myth, tells of the repopulation of the world from Noah's ark after it settled on top of Mount Ararat. Many cultures revere mountains as protectors of religion, such as Khumbila and Zion. Other peaks, such as the four sacred mountains of the Navajo, function as markers defining the boundaries of the sacred land in which a people live. In their role as protectors of religion, mountains like those surrounding the hidden kingdom of Shambhala appear as places from which saviors will come to defeat the forces of evil and establish a golden age throughout the world.

Sacred peaks often take the form of bodies and parts of bodies, both human and animal. Viewed in this way, they can be either male or female, depending on the body part they resemble, such as a phallus or a breast – for example,

Shivling, a peak venerated by Hindus as the Phallus of Shiva and the Tetons or Teats, named by sex-starved French traders in America. In addition, people visualize cosmic peaks like Mount Meru in the form of flowers and trees growing at the center of the universe. On a more abstract level, important mountains such as Mount Zion can symbolize virtues and ideals such as wisdom and righteousness. Often a single mountain will reflect a number of different views or themes, making it shimmer with an ever deeper and brighter aura of sacred power.

MOUNTAIN METAPHORS

When asked what makes a mountain sacred, people will usually respond with one or more of the views or themes discussed above. Most Hindus, for example, will say they revere Mount Kailas because Lord Shiva dwells there and the River Ganges flows from its summit. Buddhists from Tibet will answer that Kailas stands at the center of a *mandala* and forms the pagoda palace of Demchog, the One of Supreme Bliss. Each of these responses attributes the sanctity of Mount Kailas to a particular view of the peak – as an abode of a deity, a source of a river, a cosmic axis, or a temple. Since mountains can be viewed as almost anything, people offer countless explanations of what makes them sacred.

Despite their apparent diversity all these explanations have something in common. They tell us that people experience the sacred nature of mountains through the views they have of them. Whatever view a person holds, it serves to imbue the mountain he or she sees with a special quality that sets it apart. This suggests that the common factor underlying different views of mountains lies not in the views themselves but in the way in which each view awakens a sense of the sacred. To find the unifying principle we seek, we need to look not so much at what is seen as how it is seen – and precisely what effect that has.

Every view that is considered here brings together two or more images, ideas, or associations – the mountain and what the mountain is viewed as. When a Tibetan pilgrim gazes on Mount Kailas, the goal of his or her pilgrimage, he or she sees both a gleaming peak of snow and the shining temple of a deity. In fact, the two images fuse in the pilgrim's mind so that they become indistinguishable: as far as he or she is concerned, the mountain *is* the pagoda palace of Demchog. The juxtaposition or fusion of these two images awakens the awareness of something that transcends them both and suffuses Mount Kailas with an aura of sanctity, making it much more than a beautiful and impressive peak. The Tibetan pilgrim feels the power and presence of the deity radiating from the mountain.

Something comparable happens in literary metaphors. Unlike a simile, which merely compares two similar but different things, a metaphor, like

a view of a sacred peak, brings them together so that one is seen as or in terms of the other. If we say that a mountain is like a temple, we merely point out an interesting resemblance between the two. But if we say that a mountain *is* a temple, we make a much stronger statement, one that alters our notions of mountains and temples so that we can make sense of what it means to identify one with the other. Theories in the fields of philosophy, linguistics, and literature have pointed out that the tension or interaction between such terms, or images, in a metaphor leads to new meanings and observations, even new ways of seeing the world. These theories offer a point of departure for examining the way in which views of mountains awaken a sense of the sacred.[7]

According to scholars such as I. A. Richards and Max Black, the interaction between the terms of a metaphor changes our perceptions of each term, infusing one with the attributes of the other – and vice versa. A similar thing happens in views of sacred mountains, but with a much deeper and more powerful effect. In the Tibetan view of Mount Kailas as the pagoda palace of Demchog, juxtaposition with the image of a temple draws out the architectural features of the peak, focusing attention on the symmetrical form of its conical summit and the pillar-like shape of the cliffs that support it. At the same time, it invests the visualized dwelling place of the deity with the size and solidity of the mountain and highlights the peak-like character of its roofs. All this has the dual effect of making Mount Kailas more spiritual and the pagoda palace of Demchog more physical. Heaven and earth come together in the view of the mountain as the abode of a deity. The Tibetan pilgrim realizes that what he or she seeks in another world lies right here in this one.[8]

But the juxtaposition of images does even more – it can awaken a sense of the sacred itself. At a deeper level the tension created by viewing similar but different things as one and the same opens them up to reveal a vision of something that transcends their differences. A person who regards a mountain as a temple becomes aware of a deeper significance or dimension of reality hidden beneath the superficial forms of mountains and temples. The action of a stereoscopic viewer provides an illuminating analogy. Such a device brings together two similar but different photographs of a scene so that they fuse to reveal a vision of the third dimension inherent, but not visible, in either picture by itself. The sense of the sacred awakened in a view of a mountain corresponds to the perception of the third dimension disclosed in a stereoscopic viewer. In fact, the actual experience of this sense of the sacred is often characterized by an awareness of luminous depth, as if the peak and the image juxtaposed with it had turned transparent to reveal a limitless vista of incredible significance.[9]

The juxtaposition of images in a view of a mountain also works like the fusion of notes in a chord of music. Hearing the different tones of the latter resonate together creates a harmony, a sound with a special quality that no

note can produce by itself. In a similar way a sense of the sacred issues from the juxtaposition of images in a view, not from any single one of them. Just as it would be erroneous to claim that one note stands for another, so it would be a mistake to say that a mountain simply represents or symbolizes a temple or center of the universe – and believe that we can account for the significance of the first by replacing it with the second. Rather, for a religious practitioner the two images work together to awaken an awareness of something of deeper reality or significance that they each embody but reveal only when they resonate with each other. What the mountain and the temple really symbolize is their own real nature – which people of traditional cultures regard as sacred. And indeed, the perception of this sacred nature of things usually elicits a profound, almost tangible, sense of harmony, a realization of a unity underlying the apparent diversity and discord of the world as we usually know it.

The analogy with music helps to explain why it is so difficult, even impossible, to describe the sacred nature of a mountain – or of anything else, for that matter. To attempt to do so is like trying to produce a chord by playing its notes one at a time: we miss the harmony that makes it what it is. In a similar way any direct, scientific description, by its very nature, only describes one or the other of the images brought together in a view of a mountain. It does not represent what the juxtaposition of these images reveals – what issues, for example, from the fusion of peak and temple. That lies beyond the reach of words, unless those words function in another way, as poetic symbols resonating with each other to awaken a sense of the sacred that transcends their literal meanings. This is why the most powerful religious writings, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Biblical *Psalms*, often take the form of poetry.

The analogy with music may lead us to think that the sense of the sacred is only an effect or feeling created by the play of images in a view of a mountain. While views of mountains certainly elicit aesthetic and emotional responses, religious practitioners would argue that they also disclose something real, something that is actually present in the world – not just in their imaginations. Just as the sense of depth created in a stereoscopic viewer reflects an actual third dimension in the scene pictured, so, for the person who reveres a mountain, the sense of the sacred awakened in a view of it reveals the true nature of the peak he or she beholds. Such a person would hold that through this sense of the sacred he or she experiences a spiritual significance or reality that lies beyond the relatively superficial realm of aesthetic effects and personal feelings. For this to happen at a deep and convincing level, the image brought together with the mountain – god, temple, or heaven – must seem at least as real and powerful as the peak itself. Religious traditions help to imbue such images with the aura of reality and power needed to have this kind of effect.

Most views of sacred mountains are more complex than the simple case of a peak juxtaposed with a single image. A mountain is usually viewed in a number of different ways. Mount Sinai appears in biblical passages, for example, simultaneously as a place of descent, power, revelation, and ascent – God descends in fire and reveals the Torah to Moses, who climbs up to receive it. The multiplicity of images enhances the effect of the view, helping it to awaken a more profound and powerful sense of the sacred. In a similar way several notes can enrich a chord, making it resonate with a deeper and more compelling harmony. Often one view of a mountain will succeed another, like a sequence of chords in a piece of music. A Navajo will see the sacred mountains of the four directions in one context as the beams of a hogan, in another as the abodes of deities, and in yet another as the deities themselves. Sometimes the associations of one view will set off a string of others so that a person will glide naturally from one to the next, experiencing in each a different aspect of the sacred revealing itself in the mountain that appears before him or her.

Because mountains stand out from their surroundings, attracting attention to their soaring heights, views tend to gather and change around them, like clouds about their summits. As the largest features of the natural landscape that we can see and grasp as wholes, they lend themselves to juxtaposition with images of unity and completeness associated with conceptions of the sacred in many different traditions. Isolated mountains that stand out as single unified massifs, such as Mount Kailas or the San Francisco Peaks, are the most apt to be singled out for veneration as places of particular power and sanctity. Since they incorporate aspects of every other feature of the natural landscape – streams, rivers, lakes, forests, and deserts – mountain peaks often function as microcosms of the world, leading cultures to juxtapose them with a wealth of associated images.

Something about a mountain originally attracts attention, providing a reason for first viewing it as sacred. People may notice that a major river flows from its slopes and come to worship it as a holy source of water and fertility. A sage or prophet may have received a commandment on its heights: his or her followers will venerate the peak as a place of divine revelation. Someone may see a vision of a deity hovering over its summit: the mountain becomes enshrined as the abode of a god. Another person may have an experience of such overwhelming intensity that others come to regard the peak as a place of natural and supernatural power. Whatever originally attracted attention – assuming we can determine what that original reason was – sets in motion a succession of views that awaken and maintain a sense of the sacred.

Over time the views associated with a mountain develop and change. The original reason for seeing it as sacred may be forgotten or superseded by something else. A peak first worshipped as a source of water may come to be

regarded as the center of the universe. A new religion or culture may take over the region and impose its own views on the mountain. Where the Kirghiz of the Pamir Mountains revere Muztagh Ata as a tomb of Muslim saints, the people who lived there before them probably venerated the snow peak as the *stupa* or reliquary of a Buddhist sage.

Often, after many years, the images brought together in a view of a mountain merge so completely that they lose the power to awaken a sense of the sacred. The tension originally involved in seeing a peak as a temple forces us to look beneath their apparent differences and become aware of a deeper significance or reality in which they are one and the same. When that tension dwindles away, the view of the mountain, which had acted as a window revealing a vision of numinous depth and meaning, becomes merely a picture. The peak and the temple go flat and opaque, obscuring what they once revealed. A new view must arise to revitalize an awareness of the deeper reality or significance inherent in both. Something similar happens in dead metaphors: when we say, "time flies," we no longer think of time as a bird flying swiftly through the sky. It has become a cliché – a hackneyed expression without the power to provoke new insights or meanings.

The shifting views of a mountain, like the shadows of clouds playing over its slopes, keep the sense of the sacred alive in both the peak and the images associated with it – images that often stand at the center of a religious tradition or culture. If we listen too long to a single chord, we may become deadened to the resonance of its harmony. We need a succession of chords to hold our interest and create a piece of music that moves us with its beauty. In a similar way, to maintain a living sense of the sacred, views of a peak need to change, but however much they do so – no matter how far they stray from the original view – the mountain and the viewing of it remain.

The particular views that people have of mountains may be very different from each other, but the ways in which they are viewed turn out to be quite comparable. A similar juxtaposition of images is at work, often with similar effects. Whether seen as the temple of a god or as a source of blessings, the mountain evokes a sense of another, more profound significance or reality. The recognition of this fact offers us a means of relating the beliefs and practices of traditional cultures to matters that concern people in the secular world of modern society. The chapters that follow explore the ways in which mountains awaken a sense of the sacred in areas outside the usual province of established religion – in literature, art, mountaineering, and our relationship to each other and the world in which we live.

THIRTEEN

MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED IN LITERATURE AND ART

Sometimes deliberately, often unconsciously, writers and artists draw on traditional views of mountains to awaken a sense of the sacred. Like priests and prophets, they use the powerful symbolism of mountain imagery to evoke visions of a reality more intense and meaningful than that of our ordinary experience. We see things in a new and brighter light, one that reveals important aspects of life that we have overlooked or ignored. Like the peaks themselves, works of literature and art that use mountains to awaken a sense of the sacred are too numerous to cover in a comprehensive survey. This chapter will, instead, examine a few representative masterpieces by some of the most influential writers and artists of Eastern and Western civilizations.

MOUNTAINS IN LITERATURE

Metaphors embedded in traditional views of sacred mountains play an important role in secular as well as religious literature. They shape the structure of major works of poetry and prose and supply the symbolism that expresses the richness and depth of their ideas and emotions. Much of the beauty and power of these works comes from the interplay of evocative images in their metaphors. Because of their prevalence and importance in cultures around the world, traditional views of mountains have provided a rich source of metaphoric imagery for poets and writers ranging from Kalidasa and Li Bo in the East to Dante and Thomas Mann in the West.

Kalidasa, the foremost poet and dramatist of classical Indian literature, drew directly on images of mountains in Hindu mythology to create a landscape of magic peaks that evokes a sense of the sacred in a dazzling variety of ways. The greatest of his long poems, *Kumarasambhava*, or "The Birth of the Young God," composed around the fifth century CE, opens with an evocative description of the Himalayas, portrayed as both a mountain range and a supernatural person:

> There is in the north a supreme king of mountains named Himalaya,
> possessed of a divine self.
> Bathing in the eastern and western oceans, he stretches like a measuring
> rod across the earth.
> . . . . . .
> A source of endless jewels, snow does nothing to diminish his splendor:
> Just as a spot on the moon vanishes in a flood of moonlight, so a single
> blemish disappears beneath a flood of virtues.[1]

The verses that follow amplify this juxtaposition of human, natural, and supernatural images. After describing the gems and minerals found in the range and the magical beings who live beneath its snow-covered summits, the poem tells how the god Himalaya marries a female mountain and has a divine daughter destined to seduce the great god Shiva and give birth to a son who will rid the world of evil. The name of this goddess, *Parvati*, means literally "Daughter of the Mountain" – a reference to her father, the living embodiment of the Himalayan range. Views of sacred peaks that we have seen in numerous traditions, Western as well as Eastern, flicker across the pages of the poem, like images on the screen of a cinema: mountains as gods, abodes of gods, dwellings of sages, places of treasure, realms of transcendence, heavens on earth. These views play an important role in elevating the love story of *Kumarasambhava* to a higher, more spiritual level of meaning in which Shiva and Parvati stand for masculine and feminine aspects of the divine self hidden within each person. They also provide the setting for intricate metaphors that give Kalidasa the opportunity to display his virtuosity as the greatest classical writer of the Sanskrit language.[2]

Kalidasa probably never went near the peaks of the Himalayas, but his most celebrated counterpart in China, the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bo, who lived in eighth century, climbed Tai Shan and loved to wander among mountains, seeking out the company of Daoist hermits. Like the work of many other Chinese poets, his poetry reflects a blend of literary tradition and personal experience. Less burdened with mythological references, it evokes a sense of the sacred in a more direct and immediate way, one that a Western reader can more easily appreciate, as in the following poem:

> Up high all the birds have flown away,
> A single cloud drifts off across the sky.

> We settle down together, never tiring of each other,
> Only the two of us, the mountain and I.[3]

The poem expresses a sense of quiet, almost mystical, communion between peak and poet. Without depicting the mountain as a person, Li Bo subtly endows it with personality, making it the equivalent of a human companion, one who remains with him when everyone else has gone. In so doing he finds a way of becoming one with nature and the Dao that flows through it.

Li Bo fancied himself an immortal, banished from heaven for unseemly conduct – and, indeed, he spent much of his life carousing and drinking, longing for things he could not find in this world. One of his simplest and most beautiful poems reflects a view of mountains as the other world of Daoist sages, a realm beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, a place where the poet felt he truly belonged:

> Why, you ask, do I live up in these blue mountains?
> I smile and do not reply. Leave me in peace.
> Peach blossoms drift on waves of flowing water,
> There is another sky, another earth, beyond the world of men.[4]

The peach blossoms refer to a well-known story about a fisherman who wanders up a stream and discovers a peaceful valley hidden among misty peaks, where people live simple lives in harmony with the Dao. In other mountain poems Li Bo draws on much more complex images of Chinese cosmology, replete with supernatural figures of all kinds. But the view this poem expresses, of mountains as the other world of spiritual perfection, underlies the imagery of most of those poems and characterizes many other works of Chinese poetry and art, especially those composed by the literati of later times.

The works of Basho, regarded by many as Japan's greatest poet, rely for much of their effect on a direct and intimate experience of nature. Like Li Bo, whom he greatly admired, Basho loved to roam among mountains, where he also meditated with hermits. One of his most famous works, *The Narrow Road to the North*, intersperses poetry and prose in a personal account of a journey he took in 1689 through the northern part of Honshu, the main island of Japan. Along the way he visited shrines at many sacred mountains, including three of particular importance to the mountain climbing sect of Shugendo. This is how he describes his ascent of one of these peaks, Gassan or "Moon Mountain":

> I tied around my neck a sacred rope made of white paper and covered my head with a hood made of bleached cotton and set off with my guide on a long march of eight miles to the top of the mountain. I walked through mists and clouds, breathing the thin air of high altitudes and stepping on slippery ice and snow, till at last through a gateway of clouds, as it seemed,

> to the very paths of the sun and moon, I reached the summit, completely out of breath and nearly frozen to death.[5]

The passage blends the physical experience of mountain climbing – shortness of breath and freezing cold – with a vision of transcendence, of paths that continue beyond the top of the peak, up to the divine realm of the sun and moon.

Basho remarks that as he set out on his journey, "The faint shadow of Mount Fuji and the cherry blossoms of Ueno and Yanaka were bidding me farewell." He opens *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, an account of another walking trip, with a poem that singles out Fuji's elusiveness as one of its main attractions:

> Delightful, in a way,
> to miss seeing Mount Fuji
> In the misty rain.[6]

The poem, an example of the condensed and evocative *haiku* for which Basho is renowned, subtly calls to mind a sacred view of the mountain expressed in the *Manyoshu*, the oldest collection of Japanese poetry:

> It baffles the tongue, it cannot be named,
> It is a god mysterious.[7]

Western authors have used traditional images of sacred mountains in similar ways, but with differences reflecting their different cultures and world views. Like Kalidasa in India, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri drew directly on material from his own religious tradition to create a literary masterpiece centered around the image of a mythic mountain. His vision of Mount Purgatory stands at the center of the *Divine Comedy*, its ascent forming the subject matter of the middle book, the *Purgatorio*. After descending into the depths of hell in the *Inferno*, Dante climbs this mountain to reach the earthly paradise on its summit and proceeds from there to the heights of heaven, described in the *Paradiso*. On the way up the peak, he passes through seven terraces on which he finds souls of the dead purging themselves – in ascending order – of the seven deadly sins that stand between them and God: pride, envy, wrath, slothfulness, greed, gluttony, and lust. The sin represented in the lowest terrace, pride, is the most difficult to overcome: it requires a formidable act of repentance in which the soul must acknowledge its inadequacy and turn away from reliance on itself to dependence on the grace of its creator. The failing symbolized in the highest terrace, lust, is the easiest to purge because it can easily change to a divine love that carries one over the final obstacle to salvation – the last feeling of alienation from God. The physical nature of the ascent of Mount Purgatory reflects this spiritual progression of the soul as it

sheds the burden of its sins and finds itself being drawn with increasing ease toward the object of its quest. Dante's guide, the Latin poet Virgil, explains to him:

> This mountain is such that ever at the beginning below it is toilsome, but the higher one goes the less it wearies. Therefore, when it shall seem to you so pleasant that the going up is as easy for you as going downstream in a boat, then will you be at the end of the path: hope there to rest your weariness; no more I answer, and this I know for true.[8]

In his vision of purgatory as a mountain, Dante brings together images found in many different views of sacred mountains. Mount Purgatory appears as a cosmic axis, positioned between heaven and hell. It rises on the other – or under – side of the earth, exactly opposite Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the spiritual center of the Christian world. By identifying it with purgatory, Dante makes the mountain a place of the dead, another important image commonly associated with sacred mountains. The connotations of these images establish a setting that infuses the principal view of Mount Purgatory with special power and significance. In the *Divine Comedy* the mountain functions primarily as a cosmic place of transformation where the souls of the dead are purged and sanctified, redeemed and made fit to enter the presence of God. The ascent of the peak becomes a striking symbol for the path of repentance that leads to salvation – both in this world and the next. The juxtaposition of all these images in Dante's vision of purgatory contributes not only to the beauty of the *Divine Comedy*, but to the incredible richness and complexity of its symbolism.

The French philosopher and novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau played a major role in influencing European thought and inspiring interest in the divine or sublime aspects of nature. His novel *La nouvelle Héloïse*, published in 1761, probably did more than any other single work of literature to awaken enthusiasm for the Alps and transform attitudes toward mountains in general. One passage in particular sent waves of people flooding up to the Alps in search of the physical well-being and spiritual renewal Rousseau attributed to mountain environments. In it the hero, Sainte-Preux, describes the beneficial effects of an ascent he has made to a minor summit offering a magnificent view of the range:

> It was there that I visibly discerned, in the purity of the air in which I found myself, the true cause of the change in my mood, and the return of the inner peace that I had lost for so long. In effect, it is a general impression experienced by all men, even though they do not all observe it, that on high mountains, where the air is pure and subtle, one feels greater ease in breathing, more lightness in the body, greater serenity in the spirit; pleasures are less ardent there, passions more moderate. Meditations take an inexpressibly grand and sublime character in

> proportion to the objects that impress us, a tranquil voluptuousness that has nothing to do with anything harsh or sensual. It seems that in rising above the dwellings of men, one leaves behind all low and earthly sentiments, and to the degree that one approaches the ethereal regions, the soul acquires something of their inalterable purity.[9]

Rousseau's hero views the mountains as an earthly paradise where one can be healed and transformed, both physically and spiritually. He even sees them as sublime sites of mystical transcendence in which the soul loses itself in an experience of the divine:

> Imagine the variety, the grandeur, the beauty of a thousand astonishing sights . . . In the end the spectacle has something – I don't know what – of magic, of the supernatural, that ravishes the spirit and the senses; one forgets everything, one forgets oneself, one no longer knows where one is.[10]

After the publication of *La nouvelle Héloïse*, no grand tour of Europe was complete without an obligatory stop to refresh one's jaded spirits with a view of the Alps.

Mountains also play an important role in a major work by another European philosopher, the German Friedrich Nietzsche. They provide a mythic setting and source of imagery for many of the ideas expressed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his impassioned account of the life and teachings of a prophet he named Zarathustra after the founder of Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Iran. Nietzsche begins and ends this lyrical work with references to mountains, enclosing the philosophy presented within its pages in an exalted realm of inspired wisdom set apart from the profane world of ordinary thought. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* opens with a passage that establishes the context for the story and ideas to follow:

> When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he had the enjoyment of his spirit and his solitude and he did not weary of it for ten years. But at last his heart turned – and one morning he rose with the dawn.[11]

Like Moses on Mount Sinai, Zarathustra comes down from the heights with a message for humankind – in this case, the pronouncement of the death of God and his replacement by the superman. The title of a later section, "Of Old and New Law-Tables," makes the comparison with the ascent of the Hebrew prophet even more apparent. In the opening passage Nietzsche draws on traditional views of sacred mountains as places of revelation and transformation, where holy men go for spiritual wisdom and purification. At the end Zarathustra returns to the heights to complete his process of awakening. The

book closes with a vision of him coming out of his mountain cave, fully transformed and enlightened, knowing at last what he needs to do:

> Thus spoke Zarathustra and left his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning sun emerging from behind dark mountains.[12]

Nietzsche uses the metaphor of mountain climbing to express the idea of self-transcendence basic to his conception of the superman, one who overcomes himself to attain the ultimate heights of superhuman perfection. As he climbs up a ridge, Zarathustra says to himself:

> In order to see *much* one must learn to *look away* from oneself – every mountain-climber needs this hardness . . . you must climb above yourself – up and beyond, until you have even your stars under you! Yes! To look down upon myself and even upon my stars: that alone would I call my *summit*, that has remained for me as my *ultimate* summit![13]

In its notion of self-transcendence, expressed through images of mountain climbing, Nietzsche's conception of the superman has something in common with Buddhist ideas of a Bodhisattva who attains perfection by overcoming himself – or his illusion of self – for the sake of a higher goal. But the exaggerated emphasis on power and the lack of compassion in Nietzsche's image of the ideal human being set some who espoused his philosophy on a very different path from that of Buddhism – one that led to the horrors of Nazism. The extreme view of mountain climbing presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* also inspired German and Austrian mountaineers of the Third Reich to drive themselves so far beyond the limits of their abilities that a number of them perished in attempts to demonstrate the superiority of the so-called Aryan superman.

Taking a different approach, emphasizing love rather than power, the German author Thomas Mann, one of the most important novelists of the twentieth century, constructed an entire novel around the theme of the sacred mountain as a timeless embodiment of the other world. Conceived as a critique of European society before World War I, *The Magic Mountain* tells the story of a young engineer named Hans Castorp who goes to visit a sick relative at a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Alps. Leaving the bourgeois concerns of life in the flatlands far below, he enters a rarefied realm of sickness, healing, and death, where time ceases to have its usual meaning. Days, weeks, months, seasons: they all flow into each other and become indistinguishable, no longer the measure of anything of any real significance. Fascinated by this strange environment, so different from the world to which he is accustomed, Castorp develops a spot of infection on his lungs and winds up staying for seven years. Free from the constraints of time, no longer subject to the obligations of ordinary life, he finds the leisure to explore ideas and discover himself. The mountains become for him a place of awakening.

This process of awakening culminates in a vision high in the Alps that forms the artistic climax of the book. Setting off alone on skis, Castorp climbs up into a gathering snowstorm, drawn to the heights by the kind of fascination and fear that characterize the experience of the sacred:

> He pressed on, turning right and left among rocky, snow-clad elevations, and came behind them on an incline, then a level spot, then on the mountains themselves – how alluring and accessible seemed their softly covered gorges and defiles! His blood leaped at the strong allurement of the distance and the height, the ever profounder solitude. At risk of a late return he pressed on, deeper into the wild silence, the monstrous and the menacing, despite that gathering darkness was sinking down over the region like a veil and heightening his inner apprehension until it presently passed into actual fear.[14]

The storm breaks, and lost in the snow, he slips into a dream in which he beholds an earthly paradise set on sunlit hills beside the Mediterranean – an idyllic landscape from classical mythology, peopled with beautiful men, women, and children radiating the spirit of love. But hidden within this heavenly vision, like a worm in a shining apple, he spies the horror of a demonic sacrifice: he enters a Greek temple and comes upon two hags ripping apart a child and chewing its bloody bones.

Awakening from the dream, he has a revelation about the significance of what he has seen. Death has great power over man: it appears even in his vision of paradise. But love is stronger: it produces a sweetness of thought that will ultimately prevail. He concludes, with the only sentence italicized in the entire novel,

> *For the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts*. – And with this – I awake. For I have dreamed it out to the end, I have come to my goal. Long, long have I sought after this word . . . Deep into the snow mountains my search has led me. Now I have it fast. My dream has given it me, in utter clearness, that I may know it forever.[15]

From this high point of revelation, Castorp descends to the sanatorium and eventually to the flatlands below. The book ends with a view of him fighting in the hideous battlefields of World War I. The last sentence poses a hopeful question, brought down from the visionary heights of the Magic Mountain:

> Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow, may it be that Love one day shall mount?[16]

Where Mann glimpsed a hope of love emerging from the ruins of humanity's passion for destruction, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, saw something less comforting – a stark

awareness of "the desolation of reality," revealed in a vision of hermits meditating in caves on the icy slopes of a sacred peak – either Meru or Everest. Named for the cosmic mountain of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, his poem "Meru," completed in 1934, uses the image of this mountain to express a profound disillusionment with the ephemeral accomplishments of civilization, epitomized in the vanished glories of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, destroyed by the incessant ravening of human thought.[17]

A similar expression of disillusionment appears in Yeats' most widely quoted poem, "The Second Coming," composed fifteen years before "Meru" in 1919, just after the end of World War I. Both poems open with images of disintegrating circles symbolizing the breakdown of culture and society: the hoop of civilization brought tenuously together by illusion in "Meru" and the expanding spirals of a falcon's flight in "The Second Coming" with its well-known line, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." The nature of what follows this shared symbol of disintegration, however, has changed in the later work. The horrifying image of a sphinx-like beast being born in Bethlehem at the end of "The Second Coming" has become in "Meru" a bleak vision of naked ascetics caverned in snow on a mountain in Tibet.[18]

For all its apparent bleakness, this vision, with its dismissal of humanity's achievements, has positive implications lacking in the earlier poem. Yeats was well aware that the mountain he chose, Meru, stands in Indian mythology as the supreme symbol of the kind of center whose loss he lamented in "The Second Coming" – a center that gives stability and order to the universe around it. Around the time he composed "Meru," he wrote an introduction to a Hindu swami's account of a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, the sacred peak in Tibet identified with Mount Meru. In this introduction Yeats discusses the significance of the mountain as a cosmic center and goes on to use the same image of a cave on Meru to describe those who go beyond illusion to attain the supreme goal of spiritual liberation:

> He that moves towards the full moon [taking the path to liberation] may, if wise, go to the Gods (expressed or symbolized in the senses) and share their long lives, or if to Brahma's question 'Who are you?' he can answer 'Yourself,' pass out of these three penitential circles, that of common men, that of gifted men, that of the Gods, and find some cavern upon Meru, and so pass out of all life.[19]

The desolation of which the poem speaks – and which the mountain embodies – refers to the destruction of "manifold illusion," revealing the underlying reality that is humankind's ultimate salvation, blissfully free from the painful round of life and death.

Perhaps inspired by his interest in Kailas and Meru, Yeats asked to join a group of England's leading climbers on one of their outings to cliffs in Wales.

Geoffrey Winthrop Young, the leader of the party and a poet in his own right, refused to let him come. He had heard that Yeats, who engaged in mystical practices, planned to project himself up the rock in the visualized form of a small green jade elephant. Someone like that, Young felt, would be too dangerous to have on the other end of a climbing rope.[20]

A contemporary of Yeats expressed in prose the disillusionment that many felt in the aftermath of World War I and its pointless orgy of death and wasted lives. The frozen body of a leopard found in 1926 near the highest point of Kilimanjaro inspired Ernest Hemingway to write a short story that made the African mountain one of the most famous mountains in modern literature – "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." The story begins with a quote describing the bizarre remains and the enigmatic question they pose:

> Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.[21]

The end of the story gives an indication of the ultimate answer to the question of what the leopard – and Hemingway – were seeking. As the hero, a writer named Harry who has wasted his life, lies in his safari tent, dying of gangrene, he falls into a delirium and has a vision of a bush pilot coming to save him. They take off in the airplane and fly into a storm. When they come out, heading toward the mountain, Harry suddenly realizes that this is no ordinary flight:

> Compie [Compton, the pilot] turned his head and grinned and pointed and there ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going.[22]

For Hemingway Kilimanjaro was an awe-inspiring place of the dead and a symbol of the mystery into which they vanish – a widespread theme of sacred mountains. The story reflects Hemingway's greatest obsession, a preoccupation with death that runs through many of his books, such as *Death in the Afternoon*, that led him eventually to take his own life.

During World War II, a few years after Yeats composed "Meru," his poem about the mountain at the center of the Buddhist and Hindu universe, René Daumal, a French mystic and writer, attempted to construct a cosmic axis for the modern world. Drawing on the symbolism of sacred peaks in Eastern and Western traditions, his allegorical novel *Mount Analogue* posits the existence of a supreme mountain "uniting Earth and Heaven" – a concrete symbol of the way by which people may awaken from the slumber of their usual state of mind and ascend to a higher level of consciousness. Writing as a character in his own book, Daumal decides that such a peak must have the following characteristics:

> *For a mountain to play the role of Mount Analogue, I concluded*, its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible *to human beings as nature has made*

> *them. It must be* unique, *and it must* exist geographically. *The door to the invisible must be visible.*[23]

Having decided that the summits of the highest known mountains lack the requisite inaccessibility and that mythic peaks like Meru lack the necessary geographical reality, Daumal and a group of like-minded characters, led by a professor of mountaineering named Pierre Sogol, determine that Mount Analogue must exist on a huge island in the South Pacific, hidden by a mysterious force field that bends light rays around the peak. They form an expedition and set off to find and climb the mountain.

The nature of the peak and its ascent immediately recall comparisons with Dante's *Purgatorio*. The mountains in both works bear allegorical names that make their symbolism explicit: Mount Analogue and Mount Purgatory. Each rises on an island situated on the opposite side of the earth from places well-known to the reader: Paris in *Mount Analogue* and Jerusalem in the *Purgatorio*. When Daumal and his party land at the foot of their mountain, they find a community of people similar to those who reside at the base of Mount Purgatory – procrastinators and others who lack the motivation needed to continue the spiritual quest. Like Mount Purgatory the climb of Mount Analogue requires a profound act of repentance, a purgation of self-willed egotism. Sogol finds the group's first peradam, a nearly invisible crystal needed as payment to ascend the mountain, when he expresses these feelings of contrition and humility:

> I have brought you this far, and I have been your leader. Right here I'll take off the cap of authority, which was a crown of thorns for the person I remember myself to be. Far within me, where the memory of what I am is still unclouded, a little child is waking up and making an old man's mask weep. A little child looking for mother and father, looking with you for protection and help – protection from his pleasures and his dreams, and help in order to become what he is without imitating anyone.[24]

Although Dante and Daumal share the basic idea of the mountain as a symbol of the spiritual path, they situate their allegories in the milieux of their times, making for profound differences between the two works. Set in the twentieth century, the French novel tells the story of a mountaineering expedition – inconceivable in the early Renaissance – complete with ropes, crampons, and alpine guides, who represent teachers who have attained higher states of consciousness. Where Dante makes the ascent of Mount Purgatory an expression of Christian doctrine regarding the path to salvation in heaven, Daumal uses the climb of Mount Analogue to represent the teaching he considers most relevant for his time – the ideas of the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff concerning the way that people must follow to

awaken from the automatism of the human condition. Dante reaches the earthly paradise on top of Mount Purgatory, but we never find out what lies on the summit of Mount Analogue, nor what its heights symbolize. Just at the point that his characters begin the actual ascent of the mountain, Daumal died, leaving the novel to end in mid-sentence. His failure to complete his work – and the odd fact that nobody has tried after him – may say something about the nature of our times: that the modern world lacks a unified view of the cosmos needed to create a universal allegory comparable to Dante's, with its magnificent vision of a cosmic axis linking the human realm of civilization to a higher order of existence.

MOUNTAINS IN ART

Like literature – but with the more vivid impact of visual imagery – art has the power to transform our views of the world, yielding new visions of reality. By focusing our attention, a painting of a familiar subject can reveal the most extraordinary qualities in the most ordinary objects. Depicted in a still life by a master like Paul Cézanne, apples and oranges can assume an awesome grandeur as monumental expressions of rock-hard form revealed through the flickering play of color and light. This transformation can have lasting effects: we may never again see a bowl of fruit in quite the same way. A painting of a strange or fantastic subject, such as a vision of paradise or a surreal landscape, can also change our perspective on the world around us. By sending us soaring off to a realm of the imagination where anything is possible, it liberates us from our usual way of seeing things so that we return to our familiar surroundings with eyes refreshed, open to new possibilities, eager for new perceptions. Whether depictions of ordinary objects or visions of extraordinary scenes, certain works of art have the power to awaken a sense of wonder that reveals a deeper, more meaningful reality – one that underlies and animates the world of everyday life and the universe of fantasy.

Mountains make ideal subjects for works of art imbued with this kind of power. They belong to the material world; yet they evoke the spiritual realm. Their physical height and grandeur inspire a sense of wonder and awe that conjures up images of the sacred enshrined in religious traditions – gods and demons, heavens and hells, visions of revelation, scenes of damnation. When an artist chooses to paint a mountain in an awe-inspiring manner, he or she automatically calls forth such images from the repository of his or her own tradition and juxtaposes them with the image of the peak, reinforcing and augmenting the initial impression made by the painting. Acquiring in this way a metaphoric dimension, the work of art takes on a numinous depth that reveals to the viewer a deeper vision of reality, shimmering on the edge of awareness. To create this effect, the artist does not need to make explicit reference to

traditional views of the sacred: whether depicted or not, they will spring to mind, evoked by the imposing image of the mountain itself.

The subtle evocation of the sacred through implicit ideas and images is characteristic of what many regard as the supreme genre of mountain art in the world – Chinese landscape paintings. Although they may appear to be secular works devoid of religious imagery, the views they depict of peaks and valleys receding into misty space awaken a sense of mystery as powerful and profound as any explicit portrayal of mountains as temples of the gods – even for someone who knows nothing about the culture from which they come. For a person versed in the traditions of China, these views have an even deeper effect: they call forth ideas and images that enhance the power and significance of the work of art. The expression used to designate landscape paintings – *shan shui*, "mountain-water" – highlights the importance of mountains, or *shan*, in Chinese thought as one of the two basic constituents of the natural environment. The second element, *shui* or "water," takes the form of streams and rivers that issue from the heights of peaks to wind about their feet and spread across the plains. To visualize landscapes as compositions created from these two elements recalls ancient views of mountains as sacred sources of water and life. The expression *shan shui* also brings to mind the *yin yang* theory of complementary opposites basic to Chinese conceptions of reality. The viewer of a landscape sees the male and female principles of this doctrine embodied in the masculine heights of peaks where clouds form and the sun shines and in the feminine depths of valleys where rivers run and shadows lie. Together the two engender the totality of nature and reveal the presence of the Dao, the spiritual essence of all things, flowing through the world like water from the mountains.

For the Chinese who know and love them, landscapes do more than elicit an aesthetic response: a beautiful painting of mountains and rivers serves a higher purpose – to awaken the spirit and disclose the true nature of reality. In the fifth century Zong Bing, one of the earliest landscape painters in China, wrote *A Preface on Landscape Painting* in which he described his art as a form of spiritual practice:

> If truth lies in the satisfaction of both eye and mind, then a picture well executed will also correspond with visual experience and be in accord with the mind. That correspondence will stir the spirit, and when the spirit soars, truth will be achieved. And though one should return again and again to the wilderness, and seek out the lonely cliffs, what more could be added to this?[25]

Landscapes that evoke this correspondence of visual perception and mental imagery "captivate the Dao by their forms." They become expressions of ultimate reality, imbued with the power to transport and transform the person who views them in a sympathetic way.

Zong Bing's remarks reflect the change of attitude that occurred around the beginning of the fourth century. From awesome abodes of dangerous deities approached only by sages armed with magic powers, mountains became the favorite haunt of poets and painters seeking to cultivate the spirit through contact with the Dao. This shift toward a positive view of the heights as idyllic places of inspiration led to the development of landscape painting as a genre in its own right. Wandering in the mountains, meditating on the views around them, artists acquired the skills and knowledge needed to produce masterpieces of evocative art. During the Tang Dynasty, between the seventh and tenth centuries, landscapes moved to the foreground to emerge as primary subjects of artistic interest and representation.

One of the most famous and influential artists of the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Zao, who worked in the eighth century, was a wild-eyed figure who brought the spirit of the mountains directly into the act of painting. A poet who observed him at work described the startling impression he made on his contemporaries:

> Right in the middle of the room he sat down with his legs spread out, took a deep breath, and his inspiration began to issue forth. Those present were as startled as if lightning were shooting across the heavens or a whirlwind sweeping up into the sky. Ravaging and pulling, spreading in all directions, the ink seemed to be spitting from his flying brush. He clapped his hands with a cracking sound. Dividing and drawing together, suddenly strange shapes were born. When he had finished, there stood pine trees, scaly and riven, crags steep and precipitous, clear water and turbulent clouds. He threw down his brush, got up, and looked around in every direction. it seemed as if the sky had cleared after a storm, to reveal the true essence of ten thousand things. When we contemplate Master Chang's art, it is not painting, it is the very Dao itself.[26]

More than a painter of landscapes, Zhang Zao transcended his art to become an exemplar of the artist as sorcerer and sage. The dynamic force of his personality and the effortless perfection of his style played an important role in shaping the ideals and aspirations of those who followed him. Unfortunately, none of his paintings have come down to us.

Although all examples of his work perished, the ideals Zhang Zao espoused endured to develop and reach a peak of perfection in the golden age of landscape painting during the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, between 960 and 1279. A number of original works from that period have survived, including one regarded as a classic of Chinese art – *Early Spring*, painted by Guo Xi and dated 1072. A description of Guo Xi's landscapes from an imperial catalogue of the Northern Song Dynasty reads:

> Winding streams and abrupt banks, craggy cliffs and sheer precipices, rounded heights and sharp peaks rising in abundance; clouds and mists

> constantly transforming and dissolving, a thousand attitudes and ten thousand forms in the midst of their changing light.[27]

The fluid nature of the landscape depicted in *Early Spring*, with mountains taking the shapes of clouds to drift in and out of the mist, expresses the elusive flow of the Dao, giving rise to all things, yet bound by none of them. Nothing remains fixed, everything is in flux, turning into something else and pointing to a reality beyond form, deeply mysterious and immensely attractive. *Early Spring* invites us to enter the world it depicts and lose ourselves in it, wandering forever through mountains without end.

The author of the most influential treatise on Chinese landscape painting, Guo Xi, emphasized the need for the artist to bring out the spiritual essence of his subject: "If he fails to get at the essential, he will fail to present the soul of his theme." For Guo Xi mountains were not inanimate piles of rock. They were charged with spiritual life and energy, which the artist had to perceive and infuse in his work. In his essay he expressed perhaps most beautifully and simply the reason why the Chinese people have placed so high a value on the art of depicting mountain landscapes:

> The din of the dusty world and the confines of human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors: while, on the contrary, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find . . . Having no access to the landscapes, the lover of forest and stream, the friend of mist and haze, enjoys them only in his dreams. How delightful then to have a landscape painted by a skilled hand! Without leaving the room, at once, he finds himself among the streams and ravines; the cries of the birds and monkeys are faintly audible to his senses; light on the hills and reflection on the water, glittering, dazzle his eyes. Does not such a scene satisfy his mind and captivate his heart? This is why the world values the true significance of the painting of mountains.[28]

Mountains play an equally important role in the art of Japan, where they also elicit associated imagery to evoke a powerful sense of the sacred. Like their counterparts in China, on whose styles they modeled their work, masters such as Sesshu Toyo and Gakuo Zokyu used haunting views of mountainous landscapes to awaken an awareness of a deeper, more spiritual reality hidden in the physical features of the natural world. The depiction of mysterious shapes of irregular crags and peaks found in most of these classical paintings requires a delicacy of brushwork that the Japanese adopted from the Chinese and refined in their own way. Among the many mountains available to the artist for awakening a sense of the sacred, however, Japan has one without parallel in China, a particularly evocative peak whose simplicity of form demands a different style of representation – Mount Fuji. Depicted in earlier landscape

paintings with limited success, it became in the nineteenth century a focal point of interest for a Japanese school of art that acquired a special renown in the Western world.

The triangular cone of Fuji with its lack of irregular features made an ideal subject for Ukiyo-e wood block prints that emphasized smooth geometric shapes and homogeneous masses of color. The name of the school, *Ukiyo-e*, means "pictures of the floating world" – a reference to the transient world of everyday life portrayed in these prints. This school of art rose in response to the increasing demand of the new merchant class for scenes of people and places they knew, such as portraits of geishas and views of Mount Fuji. Where classical landscape paintings depicted idealized visions of reality for the aristocracy, Ukiyo-e prints presented more realistic representations of the world for the masses. The growing popularity of the Fuji devotional cult among the tradespeople of Edo, modern-day Tokyo, led artists of the new school to represent the peak as a mountain of this world, set amid scenes of daily life.

One of the greatest masters of Ukiyo-e, Katsushika Hokusai, focused his attention – and much of his devotion – on the inspiring form of Mount Fuji. Between 1831 and 1835, he depicted the mountain in two sets of extraordinary prints – one in color, the other in black and white. The second set, published in book form as the *One Hundred Views of Fuji*, shows that Hokusai was familiar with traditional religious beliefs and practices concerning the peak. It opens with a portrait of Konohana Sakuya Hime, the goddess of Mount Fuji, followed by two prints depicting a group of onlookers witnessing the miraculous birth of the volcano in a single night and En no Gyoja, the traditional founder of Shugendo, making the legendary first ascent of the mountain. Hokusai himself regarded the peak as sacred, but in his own way. He saw Fuji as a symbol of immortality and stability and felt that by repeatedly depicting its perfect form he could attain his cherished goal of living to over the age of 100. Referring to an old legend of Daoist origin that must have influenced Hokusai, the author of the preface to the last volume of the *One Hundred Views* wrote:

> I have heard that he [Hokusai] has now passed ninety years of age, and yet his sight and hearing are still like that of a youth. Perhaps he was once able to acquire the secret elixir of the Immortals on this miraculous mountain.[29]

Hokusai missed his mark by ten years: he died in 1849 at the age of ninety.

The earlier, more famous set of prints – the *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* – also brings out the sacred nature of the peak, but without reliance on obvious religious imagery. Unifying them all, the mountain stands in these forty-six color prints – Hokusai added ten to the original thirty-six – as a symbol of stability, set firmly in opposition to scenes of the "floating world" portrayed in

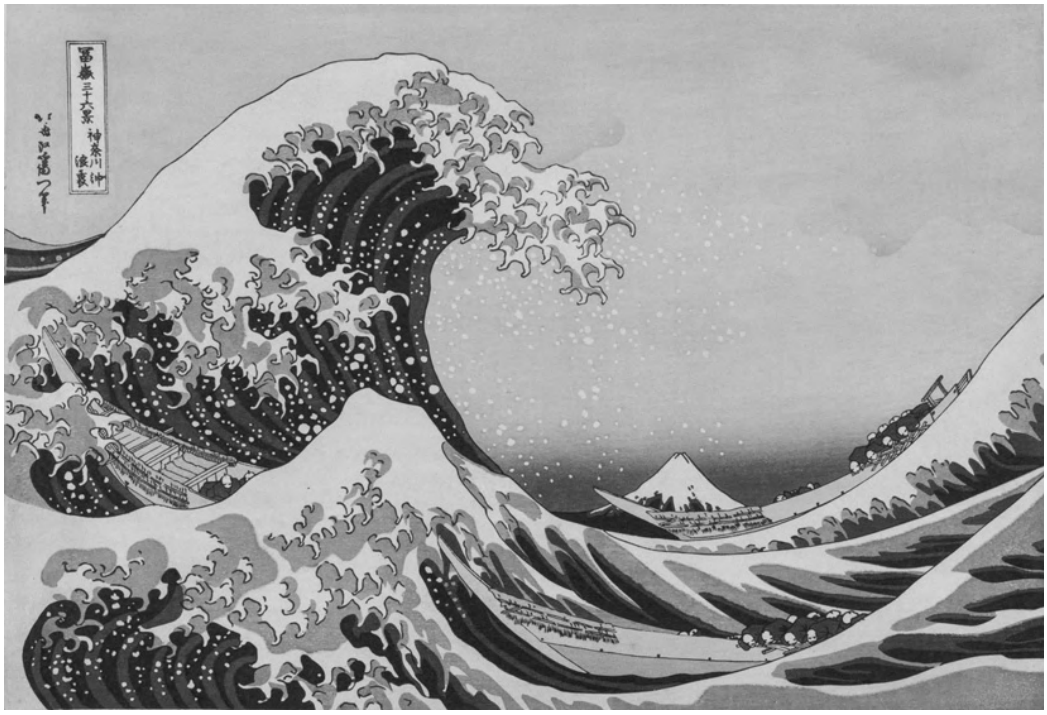


Figure 20 Katsushika Hokusai, Great Wave off Kanagawa, 1831. Photo: Library of Congress via Wikimedia.

the foregrounds of the series. The serene image of Fuji, untouched by the bustle of activity before it, reminds the viewer of both the transience of human life and the permanence of something beyond it. Nowhere in the *Thirty-Six Views* does Hokusai evoke this vision of reality more dramatically than in the "Great Wave off Kanagawa," probably the single work of Japanese art best known outside of Japan.

In this print, an enormous breaker rears up over three boats of frightened people caught in the swells of its surging power. Writhing shreds of foam reach out like hands toward the small figure of Fuji, viewed through the hollow of the wave. Although the water seems poised to obliterate the mountain, Fuji remains calm and serene, the image of perfect composure in the midst of chaos. All the furious power of the wave succeeds in doing is to capture the viewer's eye and guide it around to the unshakeable peak that forms the ultimate focus of attention. For all the opposition between them, the two work together, the wild motion of the one accentuating the quiet stillness of the other. White foam on the crest of the breaker, white snow on the summit of the peak, they share the same shade of blue below – mountainous wave and wave-like mountain.

The dramatic scene depicted in the print calls forth ideas basic to the philosophy and practice of Japanese Buddhism. A Buddhist such as Hokusai would see in the curling wave about to overwhelm the terrified people a reference to *samsara*, the turbulent round of life and death, and in the still point of Fuji at the center, an intimation of nirvana, the serene state of freedom

from fear and suffering. Just as the mountain appears within the curve of the breaker, so the reality that leads to liberation is to be found in the world of illusion, not somewhere apart from it. The underlying resemblance of wave and peak points to the realization that for all their apparent differences *samsara* and nirvana are one and the same, if we can see them for what they truly are: two ways of experiencing the emptiness of all things – one binding, the other liberating.

Whether a reflection of nirvana or an embodiment of immortality, the serene peak of Fuji represented for Hokusai a center of permanence and stability, which he sought in his life and art. His name, one of the many names he chose for himself, means the Northern Studio, a reference to the North Star, the fixed point of the heavens around which the other stars revolve. In a similar way Mount Fuji forms the immovable center around which Hokusai arranged his shifting views of the world of change. The meaning of his name suggests that at some deep level he identified himself with the mountain and the principle of reality it embodied. He strove to realize this reality through the practice of his art:

> From the age of six I had a penchant for copying the form of things, and from about fifty, my pictures were frequently published; but until the age of seventy, nothing that I drew was worthy of notice. At seventy-three years, I was somewhat able to fathom the growth of plants and trees, and the structure of birds, animals, insects, and fish. Thus when I reach eighty years, I hope to have made increasing progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke will be as though alive.[30]

Hokusai's prints of Mount Fuji were among the first works of Eastern art to influence Western artists. The way in which he used simplified colors and shapes to bring out the essence of his subject excited the imagination of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists such as Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent Van Gogh. Speaking of "Fuji in Clear Weather," the print in the *Thirty-Six Views* that most beautifully captures the sublime serenity of the peak's perfect form, a Western scholar of Japanese art has written,

> It is the structure of the mountain itself that the artist wishes to portray, and in this sense such a work is close to the ideals of the Post-Impressionists. They, too, were much concerned with rendering the structure of nature than with any naturalistic likeness, and it is not surprising that painters such as Van Gogh admired and even copied this Japanese artist.[31]

Van Gogh took a particular interest in Hokusai's *One Hundred Views of Fuji* and drew on them to develop his skill as a draftsman. One of his major paintings,

Portrait of Père Tanguy, shows a Japanese print of Mount Fuji prominently placed in the background. Hoskusai's influence even extended to Western music. The French composer Claude Debussy was so taken by the "Great Wave off Kanagawa" that he had a copy of the print placed on the cover of the first edition of the score for his orchestral masterwork "La Mer" or "The Sea."

Landscape painting emerged as a genre much later in the West than it did in the East. As in China and Japan, it coincided with a shift toward a positive view of mountains – a view that began to develop in Europe during the Renaissance as poets and painters started to take an active interest in the natural world. Petrarch's account of his ascent of Mount Ventoux in the fourteenth century marks an early harbinger of this change of attitude, which would come to full fruition hundreds of years later in the poetry and art of the Romantic Movement. Artists of the Middle Ages before Petrarch had shared the negative view of Catholic theologians that nature in general and mountains in particular represented the material world of fallen man corrupted by the demonic influence of Satan.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rocky peaks began to appear in the background of paintings depicting scenes from the Bible and the lives of the saints. Derived from Byzantine representations of Mount Sinai, their stylized forms served to enhance the sanctity of the people and events portrayed in the foreground. A dramatic example occurs in *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, a painting executed by Domenico Veneziano in 1445. Over the jagged mountains in the background appears a vision of an angel holding the crucified body of Jesus. Rays of light shoot down like laser beams, burning wounds into the hands, feet, and side of the saint. The mountainous setting of the scene recalls the love Saint Francis had for nature, where he felt closest to God. Although Veneziano painted their features in an abstract and fanciful way, the peaks themselves possess a size and grandeur that suggest some familiarity with actual views of the Italian Alps.

As Western landscape painting continued to develop, artists drew on their own observations to depict mountains with increasing realism and dramatic effect. At the end of the fifteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci actually climbed a peak in the Alps – the mysterious Monboso, tentatively identified as a spur of Monte Rosa. He drew sketches of the ranges he saw and put mountains in the background of his most famous painting, the *Mona Lisa*. Albert Dürer also made drawings of the Alps based on his travels and used them in paintings of saints and other religious figures. The *Battle of Alexander* by his contemporary Albrecht Altdorfer presents an extraordinary vision of a mountainous landscape charged with the fiery energy of a supernatural sun, blazing out of a whirlpool of orange and black clouds. For all the increase in the realism and dramatic intensity of their representation, however, mountains still remained in the background, stage props for subjects drawn mostly from Classical and Christian sources. This

held true for most of the landscapes painted by artists of the Baroque and Neo-Classical periods, which followed the Renaissance.

Following the rise of the Romantic Movement at the end of the eighteenth century, mountains moved to the fore as the principal subjects of paintings designed to awaken a sense of the sacred. Inspired by writers such as Rousseau and Wordsworth, artists sought to portray features of the natural landscape as sublime manifestations of the infinite itself. They responded with particular enthusiasm to views of mountains poised above clouds, soaring up toward the limitless heights of heaven. Two tiny figures struggling up toward a cross on the summit of a peak in *Morning in the Reisengebirge* by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich exemplify the Romantic longing to experience the realm of the spirit in the world of nature. Rather than merely provide a setting for their quest, the imposing mountains around them express the essence of the divine reality they seek. In a later painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist*, Friedrich drops all explicit religious references to focus on the spiritual nature of the quest, depicting a solitary figure standing high on a rocky pinnacle, walking stick in hand, immersed in the contemplation of a mountainous landscape stretching off before him into the misty distance.[32]

John Ruskin, the influential English critic who most powerfully enunciated the spiritual ideals of Romantic art, was obsessed with the sacred significance of mountains. He regarded them as "great cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow, and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars." The metaphor he used to express this view was for him no fanciful figure of speech: during bouts of depression and religious despair, he would go to the Alps, as to a church, to recover his faith and revive his soul. Mountains, he felt, revealed most clearly the truth that nature is the creation of God – a truth that according to him all great landscape paintings disclose.[33]

Between 1842 and 1860, Ruskin composed *Modern Painters*, a passionate defense of the English artist J. M. W. Turner. This multi-volume work, which sets forth Ruskin's philosophy of art, contains entire sections devoted to a study of the nature of mountains and their influence on the human spirit. Like Chinese artists and writers, he felt that paintings of mountainous landscapes should reveal spiritual truths that uplift and refine the moral character of both the individual and society. Although Ruskin knew nothing about Eastern art, a passage in *Modern Painters* comparing the energy of mountains to the muscular action of the body and calling them "the bones of the earth" sounds strangely reminiscent of folk beliefs from ancient China. And his detailed discussions of different kinds of landscape features and how to depict them call to mind similar descriptions from Chinese handbooks such as *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*.[34]

The nineteenth-century American artist whose paintings most dramatically embodied the ideals of the Romantic Movement was Albert Bierstadt, the leader of the "Rocky Mountain School." In 1859 and 1863, after studying landscape painting in Europe, he made two journeys to the western part of the United States, recording his impressions of the mountains he saw. His companion on the second trip, a Romantic writer named Fitzhugh Ludlow, expressed in words the feelings that Bierstadt rendered in paint:

> I confess (I should be ashamed not to confess) that my first view of the Rocky Mountains had no way of expressing itself save in tears. To see what they looked like, and to know what they were, was like a sudden revelation of the truth, that the spiritual is the only real and substantive; that the eternal things of the universe are they which afar off seem dim and distant.[35]

A painting titled "Rocky Mountain Landscape" exemplifies the striking way in which Bierstadt used the grandeur of mountain landscapes to awaken a sense of the sacred. Luminous clouds of mottled mist swirling around jagged peaks conjure up images of Zeus casting thunderbolts from Olympos or God descending in fire and smoke on Sinai. Higher up in the blue sky, cut off from the earth below, snow summits appear white and serene, a vision of heaven beyond the reach of mortal effort. In the foreground beneath the mountains, a family of three deer gazes quietly on a grove of gold-lit trees set on a green meadow in front of a still lake. Smooth cliffs hung with shining waterfalls enclose the scene in an atmosphere of primordial perfection that makes one think of the Garden of Eden before the creation of Adam and Eve – or after their expulsion.

Although Bierstadt named his painting "View of the Rocky Mountains," it has a general, idealized character that fits no actual view of the range. He painted essentially the same vista in a number of other landscapes, including one that he titled "Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California." Indeed, the imposing cliffs and waterfall on the left side of the painting clearly derive their inspiration from views of Yosemite Valley. The spectacular snow peaks in the background, on the other hand, look as though they belong in the Alps, rather than the Rockies or the Sierra Nevada. Only the primeval wilderness of the scene in the foreground has much to do with the Rocky Mountains – and even it seems too neat and clean for the rugged wildness of the range as it actually is. The very lack of specificity and the idealized character of the painting – qualities for which Bierstadt has been often criticized – place the landscape it depicts outside of ordinary time and space, in the eternal realm of the sacred.

Bierstadt's paintings played a major role in shaping American attitudes toward the West. The sense of the sacred they inspired through evoking images of Eden imbued the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada with the aura of the Promised Land that the Pilgrims had originally sought when they came to

Figure 21 Albert Bierstadt, Rocky Mountain Landscape, 1870. Washington: White House. Photo: White House via Wikimedia.

colonize the New World in the seventeenth century. For Americans of the 1860s and 70s, the pristine grandeur of Bierstadt's dramatic landscapes helped to transform the mountains of the West into a contemporary manifestation of the earthly paradise where people might return to their beginnings and renew themselves. The interest his paintings aroused gave added impetus to the sense of Manifest Destiny that shaped national policies and encouraged the settling of the western part of the United States – often with unfortunate consequences for Native Americans. The Romantic views that Bierstadt encouraged – and from which he personally profited, receiving as much as $25,000 a painting – also contributed to environmental movements dedicated to preserving wilderness areas as shrines of sacred space. It is not surprising that "View of the Rocky Mountains" hangs today in the White House, the symbolic center of the nation.[36]

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, a radically different approach to landscape painting, initiated by the French artist Paul Cézanne, transformed a relatively minor peak in southern France, Mont Sainte-Victoire, into the most celebrated mountain in Western art. At first sight Cézanne's paintings of this mountain appear to have little to do with our usual conceptions of the sacred. Unlike the evocative landscapes of Bierstadt, their single-minded focus on the representation of color and form, the structure of the peak itself, calls forth no traditional religious associations, such as images of Mount Sinai or the Garden of Eden. And yet the intensity of these paintings, the

austere power of the brushwork, gives Mont Sainte-Victoire a monumental presence that speaks of some deeper, more enduring reality hidden like rock beneath the surface of what we see. In many of his paintings of the mountain, nothing intervenes to distract our attention from Mont Sainte-Victoire whose bold form, abstract in its simplicity, dominates the view, reducing everything else to patches of color that coalesce and take shape in relation to the peak.

As Hokusai had done with Fuji, Cézanne painted numerous views of Mont Sainte-Victoire, depicting it from all sides. Like the Japanese artist, he found in his mountain a center of stability around which he could organize his landscapes – and his life. In the 1880s, after a series of artistic rejections and personal disappointments, he withdrew to his native Aix-en-Provence and devoted himself entirely to art, which he regarded as a "priestly vocation." As he tramped through the countryside, painting and sketching the landscape, Cézanne turned repeatedly to Mont Sainte-Victoire, seeking to extract from its grey limestone something fixed and eternal that would protect him and his work from the vicissitudes of time and emotional turmoil. The mountain became a mysterious obsession that cast its shadow over everything he did – a symbol of what he was trying to attain. As the art historian Kenneth Clark has written, "Of the mountain he made innumerable studies, and we feel that the painting of this motive became for him like a ritual act of worship in which he could achieve perfect self-realisation."[37]

A contemporary who observed Cézanne at work described his painting as a meditation with a paintbrush. Slowly and carefully, with infinite concentration, he immersed himself in his subject, striving to depict in art the essence of what he saw in nature. As he explained to a friend, "The mind of the artist must be like a sensitive plate, a simple receiver at the moment he works, but to prepare the plate and make it sensitive, repeated immersions are needed – long work, meditation, study, sorrow, joy, life." All great art, he felt, came out of a "strong sensation of nature." This sensation, which the artist had to experience with his entire being, functioned for Cézanne as a sense of the sacred, revealing the reality that he dedicated his life to expressing in color and form. The act of depicting a rock or tree he approached as a Tibetan yogi would the visualization of a deity: "If I experience the slightest distraction, the slightest lapse, above all if I interpret too much, if a theory takes me out of my concentration, if I think while I am painting, if I intervene, then everything collapses and all is lost." The result of his meditation was a kind of mystical experience of unity with the object of his brush: "I feel myself colored by the hues of infinity; I become one with my painting." Out of this kind of experience comes the peculiar power and intensity of Cézanne's art, especially his paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire.[38]

Like Hokusai and Cezanne, Frederic Church, a well-known contemporary of Bierstadt and fellow member of the Hudson River School of Art, also

focused on a particular mountain and painted numerous views of it. Drawn to the dramatic landscapes and lush foliage of the tropics, evoking for him visions of the Garden of Eden, Church travelled to the Andes of Ecuador and fell in love with Cotopaxi, an active volcano more than 19,000 feet high with a perfectly shaped cone reminiscent of the much lower Fuji. Among the ten or so paintings he made of the mountain, along with various sketches, one stands out for the sheer power of its visual intensity and multi-faceted symbolism, making it an expression of terrifying divinity for him and many people back in the United States, where it received great acclaim. In "Cotopaxi" (1862), the volcano swells out of the earth off in the distance beyond a primordial foreground of a waterfall and lake set among rugged cliffs and tableland devoid of human presence. A geyser of black ash erupts from its summit straight up into the sky and expands to sweep in an ominous brown cloud across the rising sun like a vision of the apocalypse and a promise of the world to come. A reddish light suffuses the landscape, adding to an atmosphere of gloom and glory, demonic and divine aspects of the experience of the sacred. Painted during the Civil War, the depiction of ash shooting out of the volcano and the cloud expanding over the landscape evoked comparisons with canons firing and gun smoke drifting across battlefields. And yet the promise for an end to the war appeared to many in the dramatic way the sun manages to pierce through the dark miasma and gleam brightly in the shape of a cross on the shining waters of the lake. As a commentary by the Detroit Institute of the Arts, where the painting hangs, describes it:

> The viewer's attention is focused on two principal motifs – the burning disc of the rising sun in its contest with the smoldering volcano. The colors radiate with fiery intensity against a low, pearlescent skyline. In this cosmic drama of light dispelling darkness, Church mirrors the contemporary tragedy of the Civil War and offers hope for its resolution through the cross formed by the sun's reflection on the lake. No other representation so summarized American ideals at this critical point in the nation's history.[39]

In the art of the mid-twentieth century, the monumental quality of mountains that makes them natural symbols of eternity has found its most powerful expression in the medium of landscape photography. The sharpness of focus and extraordinary clarity of a photographic image give it a peculiar ability to highlight those aspects of a mountain that imbue it with an aura of ultimate reality. The photographer whose work most vividly elicits this effect is Ansel Adams. His images of mountains in the Sierra Nevada Range of California come out of a sensibility shaped by the spiritual values of nature writers such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir. As a young man leading trips for the Sierra Club, Adams wrote,

> No matter how sophisticated you may be, a large granite mountain cannot be denied – it speaks in silence to the very core of your being. There are some that care not to listen, but the disciples are drawn to the high altar with magnetic certainty, knowing that a great Presence hovers over the ranges.[40]

In "Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar," the presence of which Adams speaks takes the visual form of beams of light pouring in from the upper right corner of the picture. Wreathed in glowing wisps of sun-lit clouds, the summit of Mount Williamson appears as a place of revelation, evoking images of God's fiery descent on Mount Sinai. Their chiseled surfaces glittering with reflections of the rays flooding over the mountain, the dark boulders in the foreground stand as altars of stone, drawing the divine presence down from the heights of heaven into the world of human experience. The rocks themselves become materializations of light, their solidity bringing together the realms of spirit and matter in an overwhelming sense of the sacred. Ultimate reality, the picture tells us, is here for us to reach out and touch.

Ansel Adams' images of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada have assumed the status of religious icons representing the spiritual essence of the American wilderness. The enormous popularity enjoyed by his photographs reflects the secret yearning that Americans have to experience the sense of the sacred missing in so much of modern life. Shortly before his death, Adams intimated in words what he expressed so vividly in his picture of Mount Williamson:

> We all move on the fringes of eternity and are sometimes granted vistas through the fabric of illusion.[41]

By creating a realm of the imagination apart from the world of everyday life, works of literature and art make it easier for us to experience other views of reality. No matter how fantastic such a realm may seem, as long as it has a beauty and consistency of its own, we are prepared to entertain it – or rather, to let it entertain us. A mountain can speak as a god in a poem or appear as a paradise in a painting: we can suspend disbelief and accept the view of the peak as part of the world created by the poet or artist, just as we do the speech of animals in a fairy tale. In works of literature and art, we are open to possibilities that we would never consider in "real" life. A different set of criteria applies, one that gives us the freedom to explore alternate visions of reality. Through this kind of literary and artistic exploration, we can expand the range of our vision and renew our ability to experience a sense of the sacred in the world around us.[42]

FOURTEEN

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF MOUNTAINEERING

When I was a boy, the high peaks of the Ecuadorean Andes, where I lived at the time, held a peculiar fascination for me. A snow-capped mountain shining white in the morning sun had the power to move something deep within me, something that urged me to climb up to its summit and enter the pure and magical realm that hung there, gleaming in the sky. I did not know what that something was, nor where it came from, only that it was utterly compelling – and a source of endless daydreams. I began to climb with an Ecuadorean mountaineering club as a way of reaching that high and fantastic world of ice and snow so different from the usual surroundings of my everyday life. Only much later, after I had gone to the Himalayas and learned something of the religious beliefs and practices of the people who lived there, did I realize that what drew me to the heights had much in common with traditional views of sacred mountains and the spiritual goals they symbolize.

Even in the modern world mountains and mountaineering embody values that many people hold sacred. As the highest point on earth, the summit of Everest, in particular, has become for many a powerful symbol of ultimate goals. The importance the mountain has assumed in the West reflects a modern tendency to attribute ultimate value to the biggest, the best, the finest, the first. Whatever Western society regards as number one tends to take on an aura of ultimacy that makes it seem more real and worthwhile than anything else – sacred in a secular sense.

Expeditions to climb Mount Everest serve as models of effort and achievement for others to emulate in the world of work and play. The willingness to commit oneself to the highest goal and to do everything in one's power to attain it, even at the risk of sacrificing one's life, reflects values prized in science, business, sports, and other forms of endeavor. In a revealing passage typical of modern views of Everest, a newspaper quoted a member of an expedition to the mountain as saying, "People talk about the corporate world being a pyramid, and so is that mountain. Everest is a fantastic symbol: 'Setting your sights high,' 'going for it,' metaphors like that." As a means of promoting these kinds of values, major corporations have hired Everest climbers to give motivational talks and seminars to their employees.[1]

People commonly refer to ascents of Mount Everest, especially the first ascent by Hillary and Tenzing in 1953, as conquests of the peak. In the view expressed in such remarks, climbing the mountain has become a symbol of the value that Western civilization has put on the conquest of nature, a conquest that glorifies the spirit of humans and establishes their dominion over the things of this world. Under the influence of modernization with its emphasis on technology and economic development, this value has spread even to the East. When a joint Japanese-Chinese expedition made the first live television transmission from the summit of Everest on a traverse of the peak, a Chinese announcer in Beijing excitedly declared, "Mankind has crossed the highest mountain in a new triumph of the human spirit."[2]

The values of ultimacy, achievement, and conquest revealed in contemporary views of mountains and mountain climbing occupy the place held by religious concerns in traditional cultures. They give many people today the sense of meaning, purpose, and direction that institutional religion used to provide, but no longer does. The willingness of business entrepreneurs, for example, to dedicate, even sacrifice, their lives to making a success of their ventures indicates that achieving their objectives has become for them an aim of ultimate concern comparable to the goal of a traditional monk or hermit. The difference lies in the nature of the values directing the lives of each: in the case of the business person, they are largely material, in the case of the religious seeker spiritual. One individual pursues his or her aims primarily for self-aggrandizement, the other for self-transcendence. And yet the quest for wealth or fame, whether at the top of the corporate pyramid or on the summit of a mountain, may transform a person's awareness, shifting his or her gaze to other, higher goals.

A spiritual dimension often lies hidden in the materialistic values of ultimacy, achievement, and conquest reflected in modern views of mountaineering. Referring to these values, George Mallory, who later disappeared on Everest,

wrote the following words on the experience of reaching the summit of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps:

> Have we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves. Have we gained success? That word means nothing here. Have we won a kingdom? No. . . and yes. We have achieved an ultimate satisfaction. . . fulfilled a destiny. . . To struggle and to understand – never this last without the other; such is the law. . .[3]

Rather than conquer the mountain, the climber vanquishes himself, much as a hermit or yogi overcomes the enemy of his own pride and arrogance on the way to attaining his goal of self-transcendence. Success in a material sense Mallory discounts, and the kingdom which he wins in its place carries, for the Christian reader, echoes of the kingdom of heaven described in the New Testament. Finally, in Mallory's view, the struggle, the effort to reach the summit, ends not in a grandiose celebration of victory, but in a quiet understanding that leads to deeper insight and wisdom.

Figure 22 A climber on the Aiguille du Midi with Mont Blanc in the background. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

SPIRITUAL MOTIVATIONS OF MOUNTAINEERING

Any discussion of Mallory brings up the question: why do climbers do what they do? What makes them risk their lives and endure great discomfort for no immediate material reward? The answer we get depends on the person we ask. Some people climb for fame and glory, to prove themselves or to conquer a mountain. Others do it for the sense of achievement and satisfaction they experience in using their skills to master something dangerous and difficult. Many go up to the heights simply for pleasure, for the wild delight that comes from being high on a peak, under the open sky. Still others do it to escape from the tedium of everyday life – or the problems that plague them at home. Although few profess to be openly seeking the sacred, a spiritual motivation often lies hidden in their reasons for climbing.

When asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, Mallory replied with an off-hand answer that has become the most famous and commonly cited reason for climbing a mountain: "Because it's there." Why do people quote his reply more often than any other? The answer, perhaps, lies in the intriguing, Zen-like nature of Mallory's response. The enigmatic simplicity of his reply teases the imagination, hinting at some deeper significance hidden beneath its apparent meaning. One feels instinctively that there must be something more to what he said. And if we examine his response from the point of view of what we know of the sacred as experienced in traditional cultures, we can, indeed, find a more profound import in Mallory's words – an import that may well account for the durability of his casual remark.

"Because it's there" – what is the "it" that is there that provides the motivation for climbing? Is it simply the mountain, or is it something more? If Mallory had been a Tibetan who venerated Everest – or, better, Kailas – as a sacred peak, he might have seen it as an embodiment or expression of some aspect of ultimate reality, whatever form that reality might take, be it a deity, the abode of a god, or something else. Uttered from such a perspective, the "it" in his reply would have referred to what was really there, what for him would have been ultimately real, eternally present, compared to which everything else would have faded into illusion, as the clouds that conceal a summit dissipate into thin air. Although Mallory did not belong to a culture that regarded Everest as sacred in a traditional sense, his words do reverberate with intimations of a deeper perception of the mountain as a manifestation of ultimate reality – or the place on which to encounter it.

Whether or not Mallory had such a meaning in mind at the moment he spoke – and it seems doubtful that he did, at least consciously – others have certainly heard it in what he said. A literary critic in a review of mountaineering literature wrote:

> The distinguishing characteristic of Mallory's words is that they are primarily religious in nature: their exact equivalent in meaning is to be

> found in the sacred writings of the Hindus, in our own Holy Bible, and no doubt in similar texts. In the Sanskrit it is written, Tat tvam asi, which means, 'That Thou art'; and the Lord says to Moses, 'I am that I am.' All three statements are alike in being ontological – they make the assertion of existence, that it is . . . Mallory was speaking the language of theology.[4]

As if in support of this interpretation, high on Mount Everest, at over 26,000 feet, the British climber Frank Smythe had an intimation of something utterly transcendent, of an awesome reality apart from the world of human existence, a presence that permeated the rock and air, the very substance of the mountain itself:

> It was cold. Space, the air we breathed, the yellow rocks were deadly cold. There was something ultimate, passionless, and eternal in this cold. It came to us as a single constant note from the depths of space; we stood on the very boundary of life and death.[5]

Mallory himself vanished into this ultimate reality, the "it" that is there in Mount Everest. In 1924 he and his companion, Andrew Irvine, disappeared into the clouds near the summit, leaving behind them a story and a question that have become an important part of the modern mythology surrounding the world's highest peak: did they reach the top, long before the mountain was officially climbed in 1953? The dramatic discovery in 1999 of Mallory's body, high on the mountain, failed to answer the question. Irvine was carrying a camera, and if he is ever found, the film, preserved by the cold at high altitude, might show one or the other of them on the summit before they fell to their deaths. The mysterious circumstances under which they died have added immeasurably to the mystique of Mount Everest and its significance for climbers today.

Whatever Mallory intended to mean in his famous reply, in terms of the effort he dedicated to the mountain and the life that he sacrificed there, Everest – or the ascent of it – represented for him something infinitely more real and worthwhile than the things that most people regard as important. Explaining on another occasion why he was going out to climb the peak, he is supposed to have said:

> So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for.[6]

The joy that he sought on the heights of Mount Everest, in the encounter with the mountain itself, represented for Mallory an ultimate end, his own

equivalent to the bliss experienced by mystics in their struggle for union with the objects of their spiritual quests.

F. W. Bourdillon, another British Everest climber, spoke of this kind of joy as the principal reason – usually hidden and unacknowledged – for climbing mountains and linked it explicitly to the sense of the sacred:

> One reason is never given openly, rather is disguised and hidden and never even allowed in suggestion, and I venture to think it is because it is really the inmost moving impulse in all true mountain-lovers, a feeling so deep and so pure and so personal as to be almost sacred – too intimate for ordinary mention. That is, the ideal joy that only mountains give – the unreasoned, uncovetous, unworldly love of them we know not why, we care not why, only because they are what they are; because they move us in some way which nothing else does . . . and we feel that a world that can give such rapture must be a good world, a life capable of such feeling must be worth the living.

The religious motivation concealed in such feelings comes to the surface in the words of Maurice Herzog when, after his ordeal on Annapurna, he explained why he and his companions went out to climb the Himalayas: "The mountains had bestowed on us their beauties, and we adored them with a child's simplicity and revered them with a monk's veneration of the divine."[7]

MOUNTAINEERING AND TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF SACRED MOUNTAINS

Whether they realize it or not, many mountaineers view the peaks they climb in many of the same ways people of traditional cultures regard the mountains they revere. By examining the roles that the most important of these views play in the practice of mountaineering, we can gain a deeper understanding of what impels climbers to risk their lives on high and dangerous peaks.

In keeping with the individualistic nature of their sport, climbers tend to view mountains as centers in a personal rather than a cosmic sense. After nearly dying on Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Andes, Dahr Jamail returned to climb it with greater respect, organizing his thoughts and actions around the following idea: "I made it a point to bring my life to an internal and external center point that held the mountain in the highest esteem, and I behaved accordingly."[8] Like Jamail, many climbers order their lives around a peak that has become the focal point of their attention, subordinating everything to the task of reaching its summit. The mountain becomes the central preoccupation of their waking thoughts and the recurring image of their nightly dreams. This is particularly true of climbers who participate in major expeditions to distant peaks that require vast expenditures of time and

effort, both in preparation and actual execution. The members of such an expedition may also unwittingly mimic the circumambulations of pilgrims around a central sacred mountain by circling their peak to look for possible routes up it. In so doing they pay a kind of reverence to the object of their devotion, appreciating the beauties of its faces regardless of whether or not they offer a way up to the summit.

The view from the top of a peak may, nevertheless, give a climber a concrete experience of the mountain as a cosmic center. As she emerges from the steep confines of a ridge or face and steps on the summit, the great circle of the horizon opens around him, like the rim of a huge *mandala*. I remember my amazement on reaching the top of a peak near Everest to find myself surrounded by an incredible array of seemingly endless mountains, rolling in wave after wave out to the edge of the sky. I had the distinct impression of standing at the center of a universe far vaster and more mysterious than anything I had ever known or imagined.

The sheer height of a peak constitutes one of its principal sources of attraction for a mountaineer. Most of the importance that climbers attach to Mount Everest comes from its preeminence as the highest point on earth. Other peaks in the Himalayas are more beautiful, difficult, and interesting to climb, but none has the special status and prestige of Everest, which derives from its unsurpassed height. That height represents an ultimate value that endows the mountain with a kind of sacred significance for the modern world, to which mountaineers belong. The French mountaineer Bernard Amy has written of the importance and relevance of mountains as high places, "Region of height, simultaneously physical, psychological, and spiritual, the mountain deserves to be preserved as the highest room of our extended household, the one from which the view opens best on the beauties of the world, the one that can give each of us the desire to save the home of all people."[9]

In climbing a mountain, a climber enters another realm of existence, perceived by many as higher spiritually as well as physically. On gazing out a window and seeing the Alps for the first time, Sir Martin Conway, a noted mountaineer and explorer, wrote:

> They were not in the least like clouds, nor like anything I had ever beheld or dreamed of. Had they been built of transparent crystal, they could not have been more brilliant. I felt them as no part of this earth or in any way belonging to the world of experience. Here at last was the other world, visible, inaccessible, no doubt, but authentically there; actual yet incredible, veritably solid with an aspect of eternal endurance, yet also ethereal; overwhelmingly magnificent but attractive too.[10]

At first Conway felt no inclination to climb up to this other world: it seemed too lofty and inaccessible for the idea even to enter his mind. But later, in the

course of his life, he ventured into its highest reaches on some of the most remote mountain ranges in the world.

The mysterious other world of the mountains may take the form of a heaven in the sky or a paradise on earth. There a mountaineer may see, shining sharply in the sun or glowing softly through the clouds, the things she desires but cannot find in this world of grey frustration and imperfection. Many climbers go up to the mountains for a brief escape to paradise, high above the concerns and complications of modern life. Catherine Destivelle, one of France's greatest mountaineers, wrote of her motivation to climb, "For the little city dweller that I was, life in the mountains represented paradise: a life free from all constraints, where only nature dictates its law." Hikers and trekkers, as well as mountaineers, find heaven on earth in the mountains, not just up high, but also down low. Descending from the barren ash covered heights of Haleakala in Hawai'i, the novelist Barbara Kingsolver emerged from a featureless fog to find herself in an earthly paradise on the lower slopes of the volcano: "Suddenly we walked through that curtain into another world: cool gray air, a grassy meadow where mist dappled our faces and dripped from bright berries that hung in tall briar thickets. We had passed from the mouth of hell to the gates of heaven."[11]

Given the monotheistic background of most Western climbers, few of them view mountains as heavenly abodes of various gods, but a number look up to the heights as ideal places to experience the presence of the supreme deity or to commune with the infinite. John Muir regarded the peaks of the Sierra Nevada as cathedrals and temples where he might rejoice in the divine spirit that infused the world with light and life. Reflecting on his ascent of Siniolchu, one of the most beautiful peaks in the Himalayas, the German climber Karl Wien wrote:

> So on this day the mountain still stood before us, that we had reached its summit seemed a divine favour which filled us with happiness and gratitude, and all that we had seen and experienced during the hours of our struggle upon the slopes only deepened our reverence for all God's creation.[12]

It is not uncommon for climbers to find themselves overwhelmed with sudden feelings of reverence for the divine creator of the world in which they are privileged to live.

Mountains also have their dark sides, black faces streaked with ice, gouged by rocks and mottled with clouds. Some mountaineers come to see their peaks as hells, horrifying places of suffering and damnation. Many a climber has met a ghastly end, trapped in an avalanche or shattered on rocks. The demons that traditional cultures see haunting the heights climbers often find lurking within themselves – in the passions and fears, envy and rage, that emerge under trying conditions to rip expeditions apart. A mountain that seemed divine may suddenly change and take on the appearance of a demon

itself, acting willfully to torment and kill those who try to scale its flanks. To her horror a climber may see its faces, ridges, and clouds come to life, filled with a malice that seems directed at her. At such times it does little good to say to herself that she is only personifying an inanimate object: she feels something there that she cannot dismiss. As Julie Tullis was coming down Nanga Parbat with avalanches crashing around her, a local legend she had heard about evil spirits on the mountain suddenly took on an eerie reality: "It seemed as if the whole mountain was alive, was moving. The evil spirits were everywhere around us."[13]

Mountaineers often see mountains as the hallowed tombs of those who have perished on their heights and lie buried in their snows. When Devi Unsoeld died on Nanda Devi, the mountain after which she had been named, her companions gathered in a circle and, in the words of her father, "laid the body to rest in its icy tomb." When Herzog slipped into a delirium on the way down from his ordeal on Annapurna, he had a vision of his death in which he saw the mountain as his grave:

> I looked death straight in the face, besought it with all my strength. Then abruptly I had a vision of the life of men. Those who are leaving it forever are never alone. Resting against the mountain, which was watching over me, I discovered horizons I had never seen. There at my feet, on those vast plains, millions of beings were following a destiny they had not chosen.
>
> There is a supernatural power in those close to death. Strange intuitions identify one with the whole world. The mountain spoke with the wind as it whistled over the ridges or ruffled the foliage. All would end well. I should remain there, forever, beneath a few stones and a cross.
>
> They had given me my ice axe. The breeze was gentle and sweetly scented. My friends departed, knowing that I was now safe. I watched them go their way with slow, sad steps. The procession withdrew along the narrow path. They would regain the plains and the wide horizons. For me, silence.

This passage recalls the traditional cry uttered at the beginning of a Japanese funeral procession: "Yama-yuki! We go to the mountain!" It also reflects the sentiments of climbers who would like, in the end, to die and be buried in the mountains they love. Coming down from the summit of K2, Julie Tullis died in a storm high on the second highest peak in the world, and the mountain became her tomb. Earlier she had written, "If I could choose a place to die, it would be in the mountains."[14]

The possibility of danger and death, always there in the mountains, adds something essential to the experience of climbing. Although climbers seek to minimize the risks they take, to eliminate them altogether would kill what gives life to their sport. The encounter with death has a marvelous power to awaken the spirit and focus the mind. It forces a climber to concentrate on what is

important and real, to dispense with the trivial concerns that normally fog his vision and distract his attention. Jolted by the possibility of being no more, he sees what lies around him with a sharper, brighter awareness and feels a sudden burst of appreciation for the life that courses through his body. As a Hindu swami I met in the Himalayas remarked, "Death is the greatest of spiritual teachers."

The extreme conditions encountered on mountains – wind, clouds, fatigue, and altitude – predispose climbers to having visions or to seeing unusual phenomena in a visionary light. In 1865, coming down from the first ascent of the Matterhorn, just after four of their companions had fallen to their deaths in the most famous accident in mountaineering history, Edward Whymper and his guides saw this strange sight materialize before them, uncanny in the coincidence of its timing:

> When, lo! a mighty arch appeared, rising above the Lyskamm, high into the sky. Pale, colourless, and noiseless, but perfectly sharp and defined, except where it was lost in the clouds, this unearthly apparition seemed like a vision from another world; and, almost appalled, we watched with amazement the gradual development of two vast crosses, one on either side. If the Taugwalders [his local guides] had not been the first to perceive it, I should have doubted my senses. They thought it had some connection with the accident, and I, after a while, that it might bear some relation to ourselves. But our movements had no effect upon it. The spectral forms remained motionless. it was a fearful and wonderful sight; unique in my experience, and impressive beyond description, coming at such a moment.[15]

Alpine villagers imbued with Christian beliefs, the Taugwalders interpreted what they saw as a supernatural sign of their companions' deaths, and Whymper himself reacted with feelings of religious awe. Buddhist pilgrims to Emei Shan in China would have seen this optical phenomenon, created by the projection of light and shadow on mist, as a manifestation of the Buddha's glory.

Other mountaineers have reported experiencing actual visions. High on Mount Everest, his mind wandering from the effects of extreme altitude and fatigue, Frank Smythe had the distinct impression that someone else, a "third man," had joined him on his climbing rope. The feeling was so real that at one point he even turned to offer his mysterious companion something to eat. A Lakota or Cheyenne on a vision quest high on a lonely hill would have interpreted such an experience as a prized encounter with a guardian spirit. Drawing on the *mandala* symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism, Reinhold Messner, regarded as one of the foremost mountaineers in the world, gave a vision he experienced at high altitude on Kangchenjunga a decidedly spiritual interpretation:

> In the last camp near the summit, I had a very strange vision of all the human parts I am made of. It is very difficult to keep the vision, but

> I know that I could see a round picture with many pictures inside – not only of my body, but of my whole being. There was a lot of what my life has been, what I did these last years, like seeing my life and my body and my soul and my feelings inside a *mandala*. But I was not even sure if it was only mine or generally human, yours or anybody's, just a human being's. It was very, very strange.[16]

Commenting on such experiences, the English mountaineer Doug Scott, well-known for his Himalayan climbs, wrote, "The climbers involved may experience a more lasting heightened awareness, and may even reach a truly visionary, if not mystical state of being which transcends normal human comprehension."[17]

Whether their experience derives from a vision, inspiration, or just the simple fact of being there, mountaineers regard mountains as a source of blessings, many of them spiritual in nature. From contact with forest and stream, rock and snow, come health, good spirits, and peace of mind, as well as a fresh perspective that can lead to new ideas and ways of seeing things. John Muir, a passionate advocate of mountaineering, urged others to seek such blessings in the mountain heights:

> Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.[18]

Some mountaineers have gone even further. Geoffrey Winthrop Young, a noted British climber and poet, regarded mountains as the primary source of inspiration for the intellectual and spiritual development of humanity. In a lecture delivered to the University of Glasgow in 1956, he argued:

> In effect, the visible mountain ladder, cloud-compelling and controlling rain and sun, added a third dimension, that of height, to the length and breadth of surface supporting man in the dawn of his intelligence. It gave a new measure to his concrete vision of earth. By so doing, by asserting the existence of a higher world and of a higher order inhabiting it, mountains became the first forces to lift the eyes and thoughts of our branch of animal life above the levels of difficult existence to the perception of a region of spirit, located, as children would locate it, in the sky above.[19]

Although Young was speaking specifically of attitudes he assumed to have originated in Greece, the image of Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai also lies behind his words.

Inspired in part by images drawn from classical and biblical literature – powerful influences in the Western tradition – mountaineers tend to look up to high peaks as places of personal transformation and purification. When I began to climb as a boy in Ecuador, I carried the hope that in reaching the top of a mountain

I would be magically changed and return a new person. An Ecuadorean friend who climbed with me reinforced this idea by expressing the opinion that climbers were better people for climbing. As I discovered, that was not often the case: mountaineers turned out to be just as insecure, confused, and egotistical as any other group of individuals. But the possibility that the experience of climbing a mountain could change a person had a strong appeal and provided a rationale for what we did – as it does for many outdoor courses that seek to develop character and instill self-confidence through exposure to mountains and the practice of mountaineering. Certainly William O. Douglas, a member of the US Supreme Court and a climber himself, had this sort of thing in mind when he wrote:

> A people who climb the ridges and sleep under the stars in high mountain meadows, who enter the forest and scale peaks, who explore glaciers and walk ridges buried deep in snow – these people will give their country some of the indomitable spirit of the mountains.[20]

Many climbers are searching for some kind of fulfillment, for something missing in their lives. Like a hermit meditating in a cave or a pilgrim going to a sacred site, they strive to transcend the unsatisfactory world of ordinary life and enter a realm of higher, more perfect existence. The ascent of a peak provides them with a natural symbol of the transcendence they seek. In going up a mountain, a person leaves behind the familiar world of grass and trees to venture into the strange and fantastic realm of the heights. Standing on a crag of rock and ice, gazing down into green valleys far below, she has a vivid and concrete sense of having transcended the sphere of ordinary existence. The harsh environment of the heights demands that climbers rise above their physical, mental, and spiritual limitations.

In ascending a mountain, a climber sometimes transcends not only the world, but himself. At moments he may find himself doing things he had never imagined being able to do. While climbing a new route on a Himalayan peak, I started up what appeared to be a very difficult section of a steep face. After a few moments of trepidation, all my fears suddenly dropped away. Poised on a wall of green ice 2,000 feet above a glacier, I found myself moving with uncanny precision and certainty – so different from the hesitant way I usually groped my way from hold to hold. It seemed absolutely impossible to fall. I felt connected to the face. If my foot should slip, I knew I could simply reach out a hand and grab an icicle to stay on. I crossed the section in no time at all, and when my companion struggled up and commented on the difficulty of my lead, I felt puzzled: it had seemed so incredibly easy.

In such experiences, when everything becomes clear and simple, a climber momentarily becomes one with herself and the world around her. She tastes the inner freedom and certainty that monks and yogis strive to attain through meditation and other ritual practices. Herzog, reflecting on what he and his

companions had sought on Annapurna, wrote, "For us the mountains had been a natural field of activity where, playing on the frontiers of life and death, we had found the freedom for which we were blindly groping and which was as necessary to us as bread." This sense of freedom comes in part from the concentration of climbing, becoming one with the rock and snow over which the climber moves: temporarily freed from all distraction, a person experiences a remarkable sense of peace, along with the wonder of a child. The American climber Arlene Blum found herself in such a meditative state as she was following a knife-edge ridge on Denali with enormous drops on either side:

> Climbing the ridge was an extreme meditation, thinking about my breathing and moving with focus, concentration, and harmony. Where I placed my foot determined whether I lived or died. Future plans, past regrets, and the normal clutter of my mind were silenced. I felt a sense of peace and distance from the world reminiscent of what I'd found as a child up in our cherry tree or in the vacant lot watching the clouds.

Senses sharpened to an almost supernatural acuity, climbers often become aware of intense beauty in the smallest things. Having entered this meditative state on an ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, Yvon Chouinard, a noted American climber, remarked how:

> Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief. The varied shapes of the clouds never ceased to attract our attention. For the first time we noticed tiny bugs that were all over the walls, so tiny they were barely noticeable. While belaying, I stared at one for 15 minutes, watching him move and admiring his brilliant red color. . . . This unity with our joyous surroundings, this ultra-penetrating perception gave us a feeling of contentment we had not had for years.

Completely engrossed in the act of climbing, the climber loses awareness of time and enters an almost visionary state of consciousness.[21]

Mountaineers often approach a mountain as pilgrims do a sacred peak. In its summit they see enshrined the object of their dreams, the goal they long to attain. Climbing becomes a way of getting closer to the mountain they love and experiencing the reality that it embodies. At times, like pilgrims, they may find it enough to contemplate the peak from its foot – and return from there, satisfied with what they have seen. They may even have the feeling that it would be an act of sacrilege to reach its summit, that in so doing they would rob the mountain of the mystery that makes it so attractive. The Scottish mountaineer, W. H. Murray, recorded his thoughts on first seeing the Himalayas he had come to climb:

> They were there. An arctic continent of the heavens, far above the earth and its girdling clouds: divorced wholly form this planet. The idea of climbing over such distant and delicate tips, the very desire of it, never entered my heart or head. Had I been born among or in sight of them,

> I might have been led to worship the infinite beauty they symbolized, but not to set boot on their flanks, or axe on a crest.[22]

Despite these feelings – or perhaps because of them – Murray went on to climb a number of Himalayan peaks, but with a feeling of reverence for the summits he reached.

Many religious traditions see the ascent of a mountain as a powerful symbol of the ultimate pilgrimage – the spiritual path leading to the highest goal. Dante drew deeply on such a view to create his famous allegory of the purgation of the soul as a climb of Mount Purgatory. The *Mahabharata*, the great epic of Indian literature, ends with a king's ascent to heaven via the Himalayas and Mount Meru. This view of mountain climbing as a symbol of the spiritual path brings together and unifies many of the views examined separately above. Seen from a distance, a peak appears as a vision of the goal toward which a person aspires, impossibly high and remote. As the climber approaches the mountain, it takes on texture and definition: a way up it comes into view, a series of gullies and ridges. The actual ascent of the peak requires great effort and concentration, even self-sacrifice. At various points, a route seems to peter out so that the climber must retreat and start again; doubt and uncertainty set in, just as they do for those engaged in following a spiritual path. Finally, the complexities of the way resolve themselves in the simplicity of the summit, where all the ridges come together in a single peak. There at the very top, the climber stands simultaneously at the center of the mountain – conceived as a perfect pyramid – and at its highest point. The two great themes of the peak as a cosmic axis and as a high place come together in the attainment of the goal, the exalted spot from which a mountaineer views the world as a whole and looks up to the infinite reaches of the open sky.[23]

The symbolism inherent in climbing a mountain influences the thinking and attitudes of many mountaineers. Some are naturally predisposed to view their ascents in this way. Pope Pius XI, an alpinist before he became Pontiff, wrote:

> In the laborious efforts to gain the summits where the air is lighter and purer, the climber gains new strength of limb, while in the endeavor to overcome the countless obstacles of the way, the soul trains itself to conquer the difficulties of Duty; and the superb spectacle of the vast horizons, which from the crest of the Alps offers themselves on all sides to our eyes, raises without effort our spirits to the divine Author and Sovereign of Nature.[24]

Guido Rey, an Italian climber who devoted his life to climbing the Alps, spoke of his experience of reaching the summit as the goal and fulfillment of the philosophical or spiritual quest:

> . . . and I tasted the fresh, ineffable joy of reaching the highest point – the summit; the spot where the mountain ceases to rise and man's soul to yearn. It is an almost perfect form of spiritual satisfaction, such as is perhaps

> attained by the philosopher who has at last discovered a truth that contents and rests his mind.[25]

The views that mountaineers share with people of traditional cultures are more than beautiful ideas or poetic analogies: they have the power to awaken a sense of the sacred. The images found in these views can come together and fuse in the mind of the climber, moving her in deep and inexplicable ways. At certain moments her image of heaven, for example, may merge with the mountain on which she stands to stir something deep within her, totally transforming her perception of herself and the world around her. Sir Leslie Stephen described such an experience on the summit of Mont Blanc and the power its memory had to move him years afterward:

> Even on top of Mont Blanc one may be a very long way from heaven. And yet the mere physical elevation of a league above the sea-level seems to raise one by moments into a sphere above the petty interests of everyday life. Why that should be so, and by what strange threads of association the reds and blues of a gorgeous sunset, the fantastic shapes of clouds and shadows at that dizzy height, and the dramatic changes that sweep over the boundless region beneath your feet, should stir you like mysterious music, or, indeed, why music itself should have such power, I leave to philosophers to explain. This only I know, that even the memory of that summer evening on top of Mont Blanc has the power to plunge me into strange reveries not to be analyzed by any capacity, and still less capable of expression by the help of a few black marks on white paper.[26]

We climb to hear – whispered in the wind, echoed in the stars – strains of that "mysterious music." Without an intimation of its harmonies reverberating around their heights, mountains become heaps of dust and rock – or glorified pieces of gymnastic equipment. The tendency of modern society to commercialize climbing and reduce it to just a competitive sport removes its mystique and kills its spirit. Mountaineering itself becomes a one-dimensional activity in which each climber's skill and accomplishments are simply weighed and measured against another's. No longer do evocative images resonate in views of mountains to awaken a sense of deeper mystery. The peaks themselves flatten out and lose their impressive sense of height and grandeur. And a dull emptiness filled with noise replaces the silent music that played about their summits.

Reflecting a yearning for something more satisfying than the thrill of competitive sports, Julie Tullis wrote of the underlying motivation that inspired her to explore and climb the highest mountains on earth: "In my personal experience, mountaineering is far more than a sport: it has a deeper meaning, trying to achieve a harmony with nature." As she has written, seeking that harmony with nature was for her a spiritual quest, her equivalent of

organized religion. The Russian mountaineer Anatoli Boukreev, who climbed Everest without oxygen and saved lives of other climbers on the mountain in 1996, described in his personal diary the deeper spiritual quest that motivated him and drew him to devote his life to mountaineering:

> Mountains are not stadiums where I satisfy my ambitions to achieve. They are cathedrals, grand and pure, the houses of my religion. I approach them as any human goes to worship. On their altars I strive to perfect myself physically and spiritually.[27]

Much of the special appeal of mountain climbing comes from the fact that it takes us out of the ordinary world of daily life to a magical place where we can experience spontaneous feelings of wonder and awe. There, far from the profane realm of routine concerns, we feel free to break out of conventional patterns and discover new and more creative ways of being. Rather than carry the materialistic, competitive values of modern society into the mountains, converting them into amusement parks and sports stadiums, we need to bring back from the heights a renewed sense of the sacred to transform and revitalize our experience of ourselves and the world back home. Herzog concludes his book on climbing Annapurna with the realization that

> Annapurna, to which we had gone empty-handed, was a treasure on which we should live the rest of our days. With this realization we turn the page: a new life begins. There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men.[28]

What Herzog discovered with great effort and sacrifice on the summit of a distant Himalayan peak, we can find right here, revealed through the fresh, new vision awakened by views of sacred mountains. With this thought we, too, will turn to other Annapurnas in the lives of men and women.

FIFTEEN

SACRED MOUNTAINS, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

FOR MOST OF US SACRED MOUNTAINS ARE REMOTE FROM THE EXPERIence of everyday life. They lie far off in space and time, revered by distant cultures, many of which vanished long ago. Even the peaks that we manage to climb and visit rise on the borders of our lives, removed from the cities and plains where most of us live. What is the value, then, of thinking about them? It is simply this: the contemplation of sacred mountains, with their special power to awaken another, deeper way of experiencing reality, opens us to a sense of the sacred in our own homes and communities – a sense that we need to cultivate in order to live in harmony with our environment and with each other. In looking up to the heights and reflecting on the world around them, we discover within ourselves something that enables us to lead deeper and more meaningful lives.

A powerful experience of the sacred high on a mountain can overturn old conceptions and awaken a new awareness of people and things back home. A world we had never noticed or had taken for granted may suddenly appear fresh and bright before our eyes. In describing the long-lasting effects of his experience on Annapurna, Maurice Herzog refers to just such a shift in perspective, one that extended far beyond the mountain to transform his perceptions of everything else, including himself:

> In overstepping our limitations, in touching the extreme boundaries of man's world, we have come to know something of its true splendor. In

> my worst moments of anguish, I seemed to discover the deep significance of existence of which till then I had been unaware. I saw that it was better to be true than to be strong. The marks of the ordeal are apparent on my body. I was saved and I had won my freedom. This freedom, which I shall never lose, has given me the assurance and serenity of a man who has fulfilled himself. It has given me the rare joy of loving that which I used to despise. A new and splendid life has opened out before me.[1]

In a less dramatic manner exposure to traditional views of sacred mountains may, over time, alter the way we see the world and lead us to a deeper understanding of other peoples' ways of experiencing reality. Ben Hufford, the lawyer who represented the Hopi and Navajo in their efforts to block development on the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, told me that many whites attending legal hearings came to appreciate Native American attitudes toward sacred natural sites after elders and medicine men compared the mountains to a church. That view of the San Francisco Peaks helped them realize that features of the landscape could be just as much places of worship as human-made structures like churches, which the general public would never consider desecrating. They could understand more clearly how the Hopi and Navajo could experience the sacred in nature – and were able to gain a deeper appreciation for their beliefs and practices.

SACRED MOUNTAINS AND WILDERNESS

When we think of a mountain peak, we usually envision it as a paradigm of wilderness in its wildest and purest form – a spiritually uplifting realm of forests, streams, crags, and snows unspoiled by the works of man. Although villages may cluster around their feet, the summits of the highest peaks lie beyond the reach of human use – and abuse – too steep and high for permanent habitation. Unlike jungles and deserts, two other features of the natural landscape that embody powerful images of wilderness, the heights of mountains cannot be cut down or made to bloom, transformed into cities and farmland. The few huts placed high on their sides for the use of climbers seem to perch there as tiny intruders totally at the mercy of the environment, easily wiped out by a rockfall or avalanche, if the mountain so moves. The forces of untamed nature – wind, cloud, storm, and cold – find their most powerful expression on the tops of mountains, imbuing the heights with an aura of wilderness in its most extreme and inviolable state.

Wilderness highlighted in mountain ranges like the Sierra Nevada in California functions for many today as a sacred space, set apart from the profane realm of everyday life. There, far from the human-made world, hidden in peaks and forests, lies the mysterious domain of the wholly other, governed by natural forces beyond the reach of human control. By exposing themselves to these

forces, wilderness enthusiasts seek to awaken a sense of the sacred that will enable them to transcend their usual preoccupations and know, for a brief time, the taste of a deeper, more enduring reality. Like the Garden of Eden, wild places preserve for them the primordial purity of creation, a sacred space that remains undesecrated by humankind. Indeed, wilderness represents, for many of us, a place of spiritual renewal, where we can go to back to the source of our being and recover the freshness of a new beginning. As John Muir put it,

> I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in "creation's dawn." The morning stars still sing together and the world, not yet half made, becomes more beautiful every day.[2]

Not all people and societies, however, have regarded wilderness in a positive light – or even as wilderness per se. For many in the past, as we have seen in Europe, wild areas, mountains in particular, were savage, frightening places to be avoided – the haunt of dangerous animals, dragons, witches, and demonic spirits. In fact, most of the words for wilderness in modern European languages, like *région sauvage* in French, have the negative connotation of savagery, reflecting fears that many people still have, if only subconsciously. Adding a further complication is the fact that most Indigenous peoples regard so-called wilderness areas not as examples of nature in its primordial, untouched state, but as familiar places they have lived in and used for centuries – extensions of their homes where they hunt, gather, cultivate small plots of land, and have altered the natural environment in various ways. Indeed, with the exception of isolated tepuis or mesas in South America, very few places with flora and fauna – as opposed to glaciated regions in mountains and the Arctic and Antarctic – qualify as completely pristine wilderness without the slightest trace of human impact.

In Europe the rise of science with its interest in nature helped to encourage the development of an appreciation for the spiritual value of wilderness. Where the Middle Ages had seen only chaos in the wild landscapes of forest and mountains, scientific discoveries revealed the existence of a natural order more subtle and intricate than anything conceived by the human mind. The world of peaks and glaciers, meadows and streams, birds and animals, was seen to form a harmonious system in which each part had a place in the whole. As the writings of naturalists like John Muir so clearly attest, the contemplation of this natural order in mountain landscapes awakened a powerful sense of the sacred that influenced people's relationship to the uninhabited parts of their environment. The appearance of the new field of ecology in the twentieth century reinforced the development of a positive, more spiritual attitude toward wilderness that began in the eighteenth century. Like Chinese sages

and poets attempting to become one with the Dao, many people today go to the mountains to put themselves in harmony with what they perceive as a higher, more perfect order infusing the realm of nature.

The lure and magic of wilderness, the essence of what makes it so peculiarly attractive, comes from the sense of the sacred that it evokes. There is something fundamentally wild about the sacred itself, the way it eludes all our attempts to control and domesticate it. Like the inaccessible summit of a distant peak, it lies outside our reach, free from the restraints of any artificial order we would try to impose upon it. Its law is its own, not ours. Henry David Thoreau was referring to the sense of the sacred hidden in the wildness of nature when he wrote:

> We need the tonic of wildness . . . At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features . . .[3]

Sacred mountains that awaken this sense of wonder and mystery rise in the middle of civilization as well as in wilderness. The slopes of Tai Shan are covered with inscriptions, temples, rest houses, food stalls, tourists, and pilgrims. Western visitors accustomed to regarding mountains as paradigms of wilderness have difficulty understanding the feelings of beauty and reverence that the mountain inspires among Chinese people; yet the sight of the peak has as powerful an effect on the latter as any view of an unclimbed spire of rock and ice on the former. One of the most revered mountains in the world, Mount Zion, is actually a city, as densely populated as any place on earth. Some peaks, such as Nanda Devi, are viewed as both wild and civilized: where a Western climber feels awe at the sight of a pristine summit of virgin snow, an Indian pilgrim sees with eyes of devotion the golden temple of a Hindu goddess.

These examples of sacred mountains show that we can find in civilization the essence of what we seek in wilderness. If they open us to the mystery of the universe, if they encourage us to address our innermost needs, cities, too, can act as places of spiritual renewal and enrichment. Like a peaceful landscape of meadows and forest, a well-proportioned arrangement of parks and buildings can evoke a feeling of harmony that puts us in tune with the world around us. As a Chinese poet exclaimed, "Here, among people, are the Purple Hills!"[4]

SACRED MOUNTAINS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Some thirty years after I started climbing in Ecuador as a teenager, I returned to attend an environmental conference in Quito and went out with Ecuadorean friends to visit some of the mountains we had climbed in the 1960s. I was

amazed to see what had happened not just in the Arctic, but also right on the equator. In the intervening years global warming had stripped the 17,000-foot South Iliniza of most of the glaciers we had climbed with ice axes and crampons, reducing the glistening mountain to a dull heap of rock and rubble speckled with patches of dirty ice. Much of a glacier we had skied down on the lower slopes of Antisana, an even higher mountain, had disappeared, leaving behind an empty trench nearly a half-mile long.

Along with the Arctic and Antarctic, mountains are among the first places on earth to reveal and suffer the consequences of global warming. Changes in temperature are causing drastic loss of snow cover and rapid glacial retreat in mountain ranges throughout the world. This is a serious problem not only for mountain communities but also for billions of people living downstream, who get the water they need to survive from rivers flowing down from the snow-covered heights of ranges such as the Himalayas, the Andes and the Sierra Nevada of California. Sacred mountains highlight in dramatic ways the spiritual and cultural impacts of global warming. The unprecedented melting and retreat of the Gangotri Glacier, the Himalayan source of the Ganges on whose water hundreds of millions depend for their existence, has alarmed scientists and meteorologists, as well as religious devotees. Environmental activists have sought to use the dangers to the mountain source of India's most sacred river to pressure the Indian government to work toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions and arresting climate change. With the exception of China, India burns more coal than any other country on earth. If religious arguments about endangering the sacred source of the Ganges were to convince the second most populous nation in the world to reduce its coal consumption and release of greenhouse gases significantly, that could make a major contribution to slowing the pace of global warming.[5]

Due to rising temperatures and decreasing precipitation caused by climate change, the glaciers and permanent snow cover of Cotacachi, a sacred mountain in northern Ecuador 16,220 feet high, have completely disappeared. The Indigenous Quichua people who live near the mountain have become alarmed by the drying up of springs and streams fed by snowmelt. Their elders believe that Mama Cotacachi – as they call the sacred mountain that they view as female – is angry at human actions and has withdrawn glaciers and snow as a form of punishment. In efforts to regain her favour, they have made offerings to Mama Cotacachi and hired shamans to perform rituals to appease her. They lament that the top of the peak has turned black but continue to depict it in paintings with a white summit, suggesting that the sacred mountain has lost the sanctity embodied in its vanished snow cover.[6]

As we have seen in the chapter on Latin America, the *mamas* or priests of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia have grown increasingly distressed by the retreat of glaciers on their sacred mountain and the diminishing

flow of life-giving streams and rivers from ice and snowfields that sustain agriculture in the valleys below. Calling themselves the Elder Brothers, they have called on the Younger Brothers, as they call the rest of us, to do something about climate change and ensure the future of not only their own people, but of everyone else in the world. To the south in Peru, the pilgrimage festival of Qoyllur Rit'i culminates in the ascent of *ukukus* or bear people to a glacier where they perform a ritual to the deity of Ausangate, the major sacred mountain near the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco. Alarmed by the rapid retreat of the glacier due to global warming, the *ukukus* have ceased their practice of cutting and taking blocks of ice down for their medicinal powers. They fear incurring the wrath of the mountain deity and contributing to the fulfilment of a prophecy that the disappearance of snow from the tops of mountains will signal the end of the world. Fundamentalist Catholic priests have reportedly used fears of climate change to stop the *ukukus* from ritually gathering ice as a means of purging Andean Catholicism of pre-Columbian beliefs and practices they consider heretical.[7]

Rapid melting of glaciers caused by global warming threatens the continued water supply of villages in the dry desert mountains of the Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountain ranges of Pakistan. In order to deal with this problem, villagers have turned to an Indigenous technique known as "glacier grafting," based on older sacred ideas. Like the Yakutat Tlingit of Alaska, they have traditionally viewed glaciers as male and female. Taking a piece of ice from a female glacier and a piece from a male glacier, people put them together in a shaded spot high in the mountains to procreate a new glacier. Then they cover the two pieces with a layer of snow and place soil and straw on top to minimize melting during the summer. Each year the villagers add new layers of snow and insulation. Although they will probably never become actual glaciers, the resulting snowfields grow larger over succeeding summers and provide valuable new sources of water for irrigating parched fields in the valleys below.[8]

A somewhat similar, more modern program is taking place in the Alps, which many Europeans hold sacred in a secular, personal way. In attempts to counteract the effects of global warming threatening the glacier-draped peaks that make the mountain range so attractive to so many people, scientists and local residents have been trying to protect small glaciers, most notably the Presena glacier in northern Italy, by covering them during summer months with insulating tarpaulins of reflective material. They claim to have reduced melting and saved as much as 70 percent of the Presena's snow and ice each summer. Taking a different, religious approach, in 2009 the parish council of the villages of Fiesch and Fieschertal in Switzerland successfully petitioned the Vatican to give them permission to change the wording of an existing prayer to make it invoke the preservation of glaciers. Every year at the end of July, pilgrims and villagers go in a procession up to a small chapel not far from the

snout of the Aletsch, the longest glacier in the Alps. There the local priest beseeches God to save the glaciers above them, intoning the words, "Glacier is ice, ice is water, water is life." In 2019 a large number of people, including scientists, environmental activists, and a chaplain, participated in a funeral service to memorialize the death of the Pizol glacier in northeast Switzerland, melted away by global warming. Climate change has also weakened the permafrost and ice binding together the granite slabs of the pillars, walls, and buttresses near Mont Blanc that form cathedrals of climbing for mountaineers from around the world. The resulting rock falls have made many of the climbs, such as the Bonnati Pillar on the Aiguille du Dru, much more hazardous and even impossible.[9]

In the Himalayas melting ice and glacial retreat caused by global warming have created dangerous lakes held back by unstable moraines of loose rocks. A number of them have burst their weak retaining dams in floods that have caused extensive damage. The Sherpa people have become concerned about the largest of these lakes, Imja Tsho, just below the Everest massif, which has grown from a few small ponds in the 1960s to a length of nearly two miles in recent years. The massive amount of water contained in the lake threatens villages, cultivated fields, and a tourist trekking route downstream, prompting the government to construct a canal to drain off water in an attempt to keep the lake safe. The Abbot of nearby Tengboche monastery told me that he viewed the weakening of religious observance as the principal cause of global warming. In order to reverse global climate change, he embarked on a program of consecrating sacred vases and planting them in key places. He credited placing a vase at Imja Tsho with halting expansion of the lake. He also had a Sherpa who had climbed Everest more times than anyone else carry one of the ceremonial vases to the summit of the highest mountain on earth and leave it in the snow as an offering to arrest global warming. He gave me another vase to take home and plant in a mountainous spot in California.[10]

SACRED MOUNTAINS AND CONSERVATION

The sense of the sacred awakened by mountains has a crucial role to play in our efforts to respect and protect the environment. We usually treat the things we revere with love and respect, seeking to maintain their beauty and integrity. If something has acquired an aura of sanctity in our eyes, we feel little inclination to tamper with it: it seems whole and perfect in its own right. We seek to know it as it is, to enjoy its beauty and perfection – and to feel ourselves transported in its presence. We admire a flower not to take its petals apart but to appreciate the way they fit together – and to marvel at the delicate intricacy of their construction. If we see the environment in this way, we feel an urge to preserve, rather than destroy it. Without such an underlying sense of the sacred to inspire long-term

commitment, conservation efforts based only on ecological facts and theories falter in the face of powerful forces determined to use the land and its resources for economic and political purposes. When that commitment does flag, as it will, the mountains provide a place to renew it with a vision of what it is in the world that we really value and need to conserve.

In India, not far from Mount Kailas in Tibet, rises another peak sacred to the Hindu deity Shiva – Nilkanth, the Blue-Necked One. At its foot nestles Badrinath, the major Hindu pilgrimage shrine in the Indian Himalaya. In 1993 A. N. Purohit, Director of the G. B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, came to Badrinath and noticed that all the trees in the surrounding area had been cut down under the impact of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims coming each year from all over India after the government had built a road to the shrine in the 1960s. He had the idea of asking the chief priest of the shrine if he would bless saplings provided by the institute and encourage pilgrims and others to plant and protect them as sacred objects. Concerned about adverse impacts of the loss of forest on the spiritual atmosphere of the sacred site, the priest enthusiastically agreed, and they arranged a ceremony in which he cited religious beliefs and myths having to do with the importance of trees in Hinduism.

According to one of these myths, very much alive in India today, a sage asked the goddess of the Ganges River to descend from heaven to fill the oceans. She did not want to come down and said, as an excuse, that the weight of her waters would shatter the earth. Seated on Mount Kailas, Shiva volunteered to break her fall with the hair on his head. Since ancient texts of Hindu mythology say that the forests of the Himalaya can be viewed as Shiva's hair, Indian environmentalists have pointed out that the Descent of the Ganges, as the myth is known, corresponds to what happens environmentally. The Ganges does indeed descend from the sky in the form of monsoon rains, and when Shiva's hair is not there to break the goddess' fall – when Himalayan forests have been cut down – the earth literally shatters under her impact in devastating landslides and floods. Pilgrims were told that if they preserved and restored Shiva's hair they would get additional blessings from their pilgrimage – a powerful motivation to plant and care for the saplings.[11]

The ceremony initiated a program that galvanized interest and support for the idea of reforestation where people had thought it was hopeless. In particular, the ritual plantings motivated locals as well as pilgrims to protect the trees in order to restore an ancient sacred forest. At Purohit's invitation, I came in 1996 to see how the program might serve as a model for inspiring culturally and spiritually motivated conservation and environmental awareness, not only in India but elsewhere in the world. Research with P. P. Dhyani, a scientist from the G. B. Pant Institute and future director, included discussions and interviews with the various parties involved, ranging from priests, pilgrims, and villagers to

Figure 23 The naked Hindu holy man blesses a tree sapling at the planting ceremony near Badrinath. The shrine priest and a scientist stand next to him. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

scientists, government officials, and the military. I also participated in a tree-planting ceremony just below Badrinath where I gave a speech along with the local priest, a swami from south India, scientists, a brigadier general, and a well-known naked holy man who blessed the saplings. The brigadier had come in part because his soldiers patrolling in winter had found the holy man at 15,000 feet buried in snow, happily meditating away in the altogether. Somebody who could do that, he told me, was well worth meeting.[12]

A feature of the program that impressed me was the way it drew pilgrims from all over India and provided an opportunity to inspire people to protect the environment throughout the country. It occurred to me that National Parks play a similar role in the United States as places of secular pilgrimage enshrining cultural and spiritual values central to the nation and could provide ideal sites for widely disseminating environmental messages inspired by those values. Out of this realization was born the idea for the Sacred Mountains Program, which I initiated and directed at The Mountain Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving mountain environments and benefiting mountain peoples.

Drawing on themes associated with sacred mountains around the world, we partnered with the US National Park Service to create innovative interpretive and educational materials and activities that highlighted the evocative spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic meanings and associations of

natural features of mountain environments – ranging from peaks and rivers to forests and wildlife – in mainstream American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and other cultures around the world. The purpose was to connect a broad range of visitors with nature, enrich their experiences, and give them deep-seated, sustainable reasons for protecting the environment. In addition to reaching the general public, the program helped diversify the National Park Service's limited visitor base by connecting with the heritages and backgrounds of cultural and ethnic groups who have not been visiting national parks in high numbers, such as African Americans and Hispanic Americans, and encourage their visitation as a means of promoting conservation and future support for the park system.

The program began with a project at Mount Rainier National Park. We worked with park interpreters to develop an offsite traveling exhibit for the park titled "Mountain Views." The exhibit has, superimposed on a large image of Mount Rainier, three sections: "The Mountain," "Mount Rainier National Park," and "Mountains of the World." Each section employs images of people with evocative quotes by them. "The Mountain" section, for example, has, a picture of John Muir with a quote from him on Mount Rainier and a photograph of Nisqually elders with what the mountain, Tacobet, means to the tribe. The quotes in the "Mount Rainier National Park" section show how "The Mountain" has inspired employees to work at the park.

In an effort to provide multiple perspectives and connect with the heritages of African and Asian Americans, the left-hand section, "Mountains of the World," focuses on three mountains that stand out as cultural icons like Mount Rainier: Mount Kailas, Kilimanjaro, and Mount Fuji. A painting of Fuji by Hokusai and a photograph of the sacred volcano capped by clouds are accompanied by text that reads, "Just as Mount Rainier is an icon of the Pacific Northwest, Mount Fuji symbolizes Japan and the Japanese people," and a Haiku by Basho:

> Delightful, in a way,
> to miss seeing Mount Fuji
> In the misty rain.

The exhibit adds, "Residents of the Pacific Northwest can relate to similar sentiments on 'not seeing' Mount Rainier in frequent mist and cloud."

In another collaboration with the Sacred Mountains Program, interpretive staff at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area near Los Angeles designed a wayside sign that presents traditional views of Boney Mountain, a prominent mountain sacred to the Chumash tribe, and encourages the visitor to experience the mountain in a deeper, more spiritual way. In order to make the wayside contemporary, linked to a living tradition, they placed a picture of

Figure 24 The Mount Rainier National Park traveling exhibit on the importance of the mountain for diverse people and groups. The park interpreter with whom The Mountain Institute worked on the project stands next to the exhibit. Photo: Edwin Bernbaum.

the current Chumash chief in the upper right-hand corner with the following quote by him:

> Boney Mountain is a sacred spiritual area, a shaman's retreat, and a place for vision quests. It is a place for meditation. From up there, you can see everything.

The purpose of the wayside sign was not to encourage park visitors to go on vision quests and imitate Native American traditional practices – something that many American Indians object to. Rather, it was to acquaint members of the general public with Chumash views of Boney Mountain and to encourage them to experience the mountain in their own authentic ways. In this spirit, the interpretive staff wrote the following text for the bottom of the sign:

> Whether alone or with others, this place anchored by the mountain invites you to pause, reflect, and look inward. Taste the salt rolling in on the morning sea breeze. Smell the pungent sage warmed by the afternoon sun. Witness the magical interplay of dark and light shadows. What insights, ideas and feelings does the spirit of the mountain evoke for you?

An additional project at North Cascades National Park makes the connection with conservation even more explicit. A panel at the Wilderness Information Center where people get climbing and backpacking permits adds the following quotes to help inspire hiker and climbers to care for the environment and leave no trash:

> I was uplifted above a world of love, hate and storms of passion, for I was calm amidst the eternal silences, bathing in the living blue. For peace rested that one bright day on the mountaintop.
>
> – *Isabella Bird, Rocky Mountain Explorer*

> In simplicity among our mountains, there is more peace and mind than in most cities of the world. – *14th Dalai Lama*

To reinforce specific messages on protecting the place and being responsible about human waste, the panel invites climbers to join a community of like-minded people concerned with caring for mountain environments:

> From Aconcagua to Kilimanjaro, from the Cascades to the Himalayas, people are drawn inexorably to the mountains. Mountain ecosystems serve as storehouses of biodiversity, cultural heritage, and precious resources – including the opportunity for personal challenge, solitude and reflection. When you climb in the Cascades, you are part of a global community of mountain dwellers and stewards.[13]

Following work on these projects, I took on the position of co-chair of the specialist group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest environmental organization in the world. I saw this as a next step toward extending the approach developed with interpretation at National Parks to the management and governance of protected areas in general, making conservation measures more effective, inclusive, and sustainable. Starting in 2014, members of the CSVPA organized a series of international workshops with participants from around the world. Out of these workshops came a program to broaden the scope and reach of previous work of the group, which had focused primarily on sacred natural sites, to include the cultural and spiritual meanings and associations that nature has for Indigenous traditions, mainstream religions, and the general public. We addressed a key question: how can these meanings and associations inspire people in different cultures, both modern and traditional, to protect the environment and promote biological and cultural diversity? Bas Verschuuren, co-chair with me at the CSVPA, took the lead in developing one of the first major products of the program: best practice guidelines on integrating the cultural and spiritual significance of nature into the management and governance of protected areas around the world.

A representative sample shows the way each guideline in the volume comes with an example illustrating its concrete application:

> 10.2 **Draw on knowledge and experiences of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature to motivate members of the public to contribute to organizations that support protected and conserved areas and promote conservation generally.**

Example: Drawing on the deep cultural and spiritual significance that the iconic natural features of Yosemite National Park have for the general public – citizens of San Francisco in particular – the Yosemite Conservancy has been able to raise millions of dollars for projects of interest to park management, including preserving a grove of giant sequoias and improving access to Yosemite Falls. For example, in 2011 the Conservancy announced completion of the Campaign for Yosemite Trails, a $13.5 million effort to restore popular hiking trails that many people use to visit iconic sites such as Half Dome for inspiration and renewal. Without this kind of cultural and spiritual significance of nature to inspire and galvanize the public, the Conservancy would have had difficulty raising the funds it has and recruiting large numbers of volunteers to work on projects such as trail maintenance and clean up.[14]

As of the beginning of 2021, another colleague, Josep-Maria Mallarach, was working with others at the CSVPA on designing and conducting workshops for managers and practitioners to implement the guidelines, ensuring that they will be actually used, rather than left to molder on bookshelves unread.

It is important to note, however, that the sense of the sacred by itself does not necessarily guarantee protection of the environment. Large crowds of pilgrims and tourists drawn to a sacred natural site may overwhelm and desecrate the very features they revere, littering them with trash. In the Himalayas people tear up fragile alpine meadows seeking medicinal plants they perceive to be infused with divine healing powers of mountain heights. Regarding the Ganges as so holy that it will purify any waste thrown into it, many Hindus give no thought to polluting the river, making a bad situation even worse. In addition, valuing the environment for what it provides, no matter how beneficial or sacred, may set it up as a sacrificial offering for a higher end. And, in fact, we see intimations of such an outcome in pronouncements by the National Academy of Sciences that certain areas of the American Southwest irretrievably ruined by strip-mining may have to be written off as "National Sacrifice Areas," sacrificed for the greater good of society. Only if it encourages us to revere features of the environment as valuable in themselves, not as means for higher ends, no matter how noble or exalted, will awakening a sense of the sacred provide a sound basis for efforts to preserve the world we all inhabit together.[15]

The sacredness of mountains helps us to see and feel in a very personal way the spiritual consequences of desecrating the environment, both wild and cultivated. In cutting down our forests, poisoning our rivers, and fouling our cities, we do more than imperil our physical health and livelihood: we impair our ability to experience a deeper significance or reality in our lives. When we kill off wildlife and ravage the landscape, we destroy the beauty and wholeness of nature on which we depend for our spiritual well-being. No longer can we look to trees and streams, meadows and flowers, birds and animals, for images with the power to resonate in our minds and awaken a deep and abiding sense of the sacred. One of the greatest tragedies of desecrating the environment is that we cut ourselves off from the depths of our innermost being – from the source of insight and joy that makes life meaningful and worthwhile.

SACRED MOUNTAINS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The sense of the sacred awakened by mountains reveals a deeper reality or significance that has the power to transform our lives. Whatever that reality or significance is, however we may conceive it – as a deity, the ground of being, emptiness, the unconscious, the self, nature, the absolute – our encounter with it frees us from our usual conceptions of ourselves so that we can grow beyond the persons we think we are. Like the view from the summit of a mountain, it opens us to a fresh vision of ourselves and the world around us and, in so doing, gives our lives new meaning and direction. Shaped by the materialistic demands of business and technology, many of the values and goals of modern society have an artificiality that estranges us from our environment, each other, and ourselves. By awakening a sense of the sacred, making us aware of a deeper significance or reality, mountains connect us to the world and make our lives more real.

When we climb a mountain, we may feel a wonderful sense of exaltation at being high above the surrounding world, but we cannot stay on the summit nor sustain for long that feeling after coming down. What can we bring back from the experience that will remain with us in the valleys and lowlands where most of us live our lives? On an immediate, visible level, from the top of a mountain, we see, spread out around us, the vast circle of the horizon, filled with mountains, rivers, forests, fields, and cities. Features of the landscape that had seemed confused and fragmented down below fall into place and form, like pieces of a puzzle, interlocking parts of a unified whole. After we come down, the memory of that summit view may remain with us, orienting us in the world and giving us a sense of where we stand in the greater scheme of things.

The symbolism of views of sacred mountains can help us deepen our experience of everyday life, far from the heights themselves. In reaching the top of a mountain, we not only reach its highest point, we also reach its center, seen mostly clearly in a pyramid-shaped peak where its vertical and horizontal axes

intersect at the summit. The experience of that center on an inner level is something we can bring back down to enrich and transform our lives in a variety of ways. Becoming aware of such a center within ourselves wherever we are, on a mountain or in a city, we discover a strength and stability that enables us to withstand the pressures of the outside world. We experience a sense of balance and inner serenity that gives us the confidence to be true to ourselves and to do what we feel is right, no matter what others may think or say.

Reaching the summit of a mountain, we also see the circle of the horizon unfold around us, expanding beyond the limits of sight into the blue haze of the infinite sky. In experiencing ourselves at its center, we become aware of the boundless nature of the universe. Through the experience of its vastness, we discover a sense of space that gives us the freedom to open and grow. No longer do we feel confined within the limits of our narrow views. We know the world and ourselves as greater and more mysterious than we had ever imagined. And in that knowledge, in the awareness of a universe too vast to possess or control, we experience a humility that frees us from the petty demands of egotistic illusions and desires.

This sense of vastness allows us to find the center everywhere, not just on the summit of a mountain. If we remain open to the world around us, aware of its boundless, mysterious nature, then no matter how far we travel, we never come to its edge. The horizon moves away from us so that we always walk in the middle of its circle. The power of the center stays with us, and the fear we have of losing it vanishes. No longer bound to a particular place or occupation, we feel free to go anywhere and do anything, knowing that wherever we go, whatever we do, we will always be in touch with the reality of the world and ourselves.

In discovering a center within ourselves, we become aware of it in all people and things. Looking around us, we see that each person stands in the middle of the world and partakes of the mystery and splendor revealed in his or her particular place. Seeing the center everywhere awakens a sense of the sacred in everyone and everything. We realize that we are all linked together through the mysterious reality of the world we share. Moved by a sense of wonder and awe, we feel a spontaneous love and respect for people and things just as they are. We delight in their joy and share in their sorrow.

Other views of sacred mountains reveal additional ways in which the experience of this reality can transform our lives. As meeting places of heaven and earth, sacred peaks bring together the disparate realms of spirit and matter. To open and grow, we need to deepen our awareness of both and recognize the reality they symbolize within ourselves. Focusing on one without the other leaves us unbalanced. An exclusive emphasis on spiritual matters makes everything we do hazy and insubstantial. A narrow focus on material things hardens our minds and locks us into rigid views of the world and ourselves. To realize our potential as human beings, we need to cultivate both mind and body,

thought and emotion – the complementary aspects of our nature that express the underlying totality of who we are.

As places of the ancestral dead, sacred mountains represent the mysterious reality from which we come and to which we return – the source of what has made us who we are. Contact with that reality, especially on the heights of a mountain, can lead to experiences of death and rebirth. Overwhelmed by the power and mystery of what we encounter, we let go of our habitual selves and find in their place a new person born within us. Momentarily in touch with the source of our being, we see everything fresh and clean, as if for the first time. The Scottish mountaineer W. H. Murray described such an experience on emerging from the Indian plains and finding himself, at last, in the Himalayas:

> For a moment dazzled, we suddenly saw spread before us a world made new. All the senses of the soul were not so much refreshed as reborn, as though after death. We were free men once again, for the first time in months really able to live in the present moment.[16]

Viewed as a spiritual path of transformation, the ascent of a mountain symbolizes the way that leads to the source of our being. The hardships of the climb represent the efforts and sacrifices required to put ourselves in touch with a higher reality or significance that reveals our deeper nature. In overcoming these difficulties, we overcome our own limitations – the illusions and desires that keep us from realizing who we really are. But we do not do this entirely by ourselves. In climbing a peak as a spiritual path, we open ourselves to the reality we seek on its summit. In so doing, we experience that reality along the way as a mysterious influx of energy and vision that helps to carry us toward our goal. The same thing may come about from the act of contemplating a mountain from the distance – or visualizing it in the mind. As a well-known Hindu scripture says of Himachal, or the Himalayas,

> He who thinks of Himachal, even if he does not see it, is greater than he who accomplishes all his devotions at Benares. He who thinks of Himachal will be freed from all his sins.[17]

The reality revealed by a mountain can be experienced anywhere. Mountains are no more, *nor less*, sacred than any other feature of the landscape. But because of their natural tendency to inspire a sense of wonder and awe, they disclose this sacredness more easily. Having glimpsed it through a view of a mountain, we can find it elsewhere, through other places, other symbols. When we do, we discover that everyone and everything expresses the ultimate mystery of life. Although still aware of their importance, we go beyond the distinctions we normally make between the sacred and the profane, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad; we simply experience the world as it is, marvelous in itself.

In the end we realize that what we seek on the heights of the highest and most distant peaks we can find right here in the simplest and most ordinary things – in the glow of sunlight in the air, in the aroma of bread in the oven, in the whisper of wind in the trees, in the touch of the person we love. Commenting on the mysterious, inexhaustible nature of the reality concealed in the world and revealed in mountains, the Japanese Zen master Dogen wrote:

> As for mountains, there are mountains hidden in jewels; there are mountains hidden in marshes, mountains hidden in the sky; there are mountains hidden in mountains. There is a study of mountains hidden in hiddenness.[18]

Something I experienced in the Himalayas makes this passage come alive for me. In December of 1968, only a month after coming close to death in the avalanche on Annapurna described in Chapter 1 of this book, I went to the foot of Mount Everest in Nepal on a personal pilgrimage to see the highest mountain in the world. After climbing up to a high point and watching the lavender glow of sunset fade into a strange green twilight over its summit, evoking a sense of something mysterious and sublime in the mountain itself, I came back down to our camp at 17,000 feet and lay outside at night in my sleeping bag, gazing at the ranges around me. Glimmering with moonlight, the peaks next to Everest stood out black against the stars. A glacier hidden beneath darkness and rubble stretched off to my left, down toward the valleys below. I rolled over and looked at the foot of a slope that rose toward a summit on the border of Tibet, at the time a mysterious country closed to the outside world.

Something about the smooth sweep of the slope caught me up, and I imagined myself gliding up it to a ridge and on up the ridge to the edge of . . . . It suddenly hit me that I was on the edge of Tibet where there were mountains and valleys that had never been mapped nor even explored. My God, I thought, there's still a place left in the world that's really unmapped, unknown, that people haven't labeled and described.

And suddenly, a feeling that was stronger than a feeling, a feeling with the conviction and certainty of reality, swept through me: the rest of the world is like that, as unmapped and unexplored as Tibet. In some mysterious, inexplicable way, there are valleys and mountains all around us that no one has ever seen nor mapped – a world hidden right here, as if in another dimension.

The thought took me back to my childhood, to a memory whose feeling I had long forgotten. When I was three or four, I would go with my parents to the airport to watch airplanes take off in the early morning sun and fly out over blue-misted mountains. At that age I had never seen a map and anything could have been out there – the world was vast and fresh and endlessly fascinating. And now it felt that way again.

Mountains help us to regain that sense of freshness and wonder possessed by a child. They awaken us to a deeper reality hidden in the world around us, even

in cities, far from the sight of the peaks themselves. Moved by the mysterious power of this hidden reality, we recover the vision and delight of childhood, enhanced by the experience and understanding of age. Eyes bright and clear, hearts open and free, we stand once again at the beginning and source of all that is and all that may be.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED

1. Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1970), 197. In addition, people of different cultures experience the sacred in different ways and some have no equivalent term in their languages.
2. Kukai, "Stone Inscription for the Sramana Shodo Who Crossed Mountains and Streams in His Search for Awakening," trans. Allan Grapard, in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979), 55.
3. Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna*, trans. Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (New York: E. Dutton, 1952), 206–7.
4. See Rudolf Otto's classic and influential work, *The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige)*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1950). People of different cultures, however, experience the sacred in various ways, and some have no equivalent word in their languages, suggesting the term is not universal.
5. Guido Rey, *Peaks and Precipices: Scrambles in the Dolomites and Savoy*, trans. J. E. C. Eaton (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1914), 187–88.
6. From "A Poetic Description of the High Tower," attributed to Song Yu. For a French translation, see Paul Demiéville, "La montagne dans l'art littéraire chinois," *France-Asie/Asia* 20 (1965), 13. Following common usage for dates, I use BCE (Before Common Era) for BC and CE (Common Era) for AD.
7. Gaston Rébuffat, *Mont Blanc to Everest*, trans. Geoffrey Sutton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 83.
8. From Pascal's famous *Mémorial* describing his experience on the night of November 23, 1654.
9. Freda Du Faur, *The Conquest of Mount Cook and Other Climbs: An Account of Four Seasons' Mountaineering on the Southern Alps of New Zealand* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 27. On Smythe see Herbert Tichy, *Himalaya*, trans. Richard Rickett and David Streatfeild (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 118.
10. Julie Tullis, *Clouds from Both Sides* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987), 182; and Rudyard Kipling, "The Explorer," in *The Five Nations* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), 52.
11. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 12.
12. Ps. 125:1.
13. Eccles. 1:14.
14. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28.
15. Herzog, *Annapurna*, 207.

1 THE HIMALAYAS: ABODE OF THE SACRED

1. Strictly speaking the name of the range is "Himalaya" in the singular, meaning the "Abode of Snow," but I use the plural "Himalayas" since it's the more familiar form in the English language.
2. From the *Manasakhanda* of the *Skanda Purana*, adapted from Edwin T. Atkinson, *Kumaun Hills: Its History, Geography and Anthropology with Reference to Garhwal and*

Nepal (Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1974), 308.

3. *Rig Veda* 10.121.4, in Wendy O'Flaherty, trans., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 28.
4. Yarlha Shampo is one of a group of four major sacred mountains associated with the four directions of the compass.
5. *Mahabharata* 3.31.39.16–20, in Johannes A. B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahabharata*, vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 298–99.
6. The usual Tibetan name for Everest is Jomolangma (*jo mo glang ma* in transliteration) rather than Chomolungma – see Alexander W. Macdonald, "The Lama and the General," *Kailash* 1, no. 3 (1973), 227, n. 8; and Frances Klatzel, ed., *Stories and Customs of the Sherpas as Told by Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu, Abbot of Tengboche Monastery*, 4th ed. (Kathmandu: Mera Publications, 2000), 14.
7. The five goddesses are called in Tibetan the Tsering Che-nga (*tshe ring mched lgna*) – on them and Miyolangsangma (*mi gyo glang bzang ma*), see René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956), 177–81.
8. On Baburam Acarya and Sagarmatha, see *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, ed. Amaresh Datta, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), 807. For the usual Nepali interpretation of Sagarmatha, see Macdonald, "The Lama and the General," 227, n. 8. For the ocean churning myth, see Wendy O'Flaherty, trans., *Hindu Myths* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1975), 274–80.
9. On Khumbila, see Klatzel, *Stories and Customs*, 15.
10. This myth is the subject of Kalidasa's poem *Kumarasambhava*, translated in Kalidasa, *The Origin of the Young God: Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava*, trans. Hank Heifetz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).
11. *Meghaduta* 64. Kalidasa, *The Transport of Love: The Meghaduta of Kalidasa*, trans. Leonard Nathan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 59. For a detailed study of transformations of Kailas making it only recently a major place of pilgrimage, see Alex McKay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography* (Netherlands: Brill, 2015).
12. Andrea Loseries-Leck, "On the Sacredness of Mount Kailasa in Indian and Tibetan Sources," in *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, ed. Alex McKay (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1998), 149–52.
13. Loseries-Leck, "Sacredness of Mount Kailasa," 158–62. On Kailas in Hinduism, see ibid., 145–49.
14. Garma C. C. Chang, trans., *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1977), 262. The story of Milarepa and Naro Bhun Chon appears in ibid., 215–24.
15. Demchog is the Tibetan name for the tantric deity whose name in Sanskrit is Chakrasamvara (cakrasaṃvara).
16. Sumeru means "Good Meru." For more on Meru, see Ian Mabbett, "The Symbolism of Mount Meru," *History of Religions* 23, no. 1 (1983), 64–83.
17. For more on Kailas and its circumambulation, see the Select Bibliography.
18. Govinda, *Way of the White Clouds*, 206.
19. The quotes from Desideri and Rawling appear in John Snelling, *The Sacred Mountain* (London and the Hague: East West Publications, 1983), 53, 86.
20. Snelling, *Sacred Mountain*, 120–32; and Herbert Tichy, *Himalaya*, trans. Richard Rickett and David Streatfield (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 35–45.
21. "China, India, and Nepal Keen on Creating a Trans-boundary UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Kailash Sacred Landscape," ICIMOD (Jan. 28, 2016), www.icimod.org/china-india-and-nepal-keen-on-creating-a-trans-boundary-unesco-world-heritage-site-in-the-kailash-sacred-landscape/. On Outstanding Universal Value, see *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019), 20. On sacred

mountains as World Heritage sites, see UNESCO *Thematic Expert Meeting on Asia-Pacific Sacred Mountains: Final Report* (Tokyo: World Heritage Centre, UNESCO/Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan/Wakayama Prefectural Government, 2001).

22. H. Adams Carter, "The Goddess Nanda and Place Names of the Nanda Devi Region," *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no. 51 (1977), 24–27.
23. For the Nanda Devi pilgrimage and the story of Rup Kund, see William S. Sax, *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in Himalayan Pilgrimage* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); as well as Man Mohan Sharma, *Through the Valley of Gods: Travels in the Central Himalayas*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1978), 226–27; and Gurmeet and Elizabeth Thukral, *Garhwal Himalaya* (New Delhi: Frank Bros. & Co., 1987), 109–12.
24. On the flood myth, see O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, 181–84; on local variants linking it to Nanda Devi and the Rajis, see Sharma, *Valley of Gods,* 44–45.
25. Eric Shipton, *Nanda Devi*, in *The Six Mountain-Travel Books*, ed. Jim Perrin, repr. ed. (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1985), 72.
26. Personal conversation with H. Adams Carter.
27. Louis F. Reichardt and William F. Unsoeld, "Nanda Devi from the North," *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no. 51 (1977), 21–22.
28. From conversations with H. Adams Carter and his article "The Goddess Nanda and Place Names of the Nanda Devi Region," *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no. 51 (1977), 29.
29. On the American woman's expedition, see Arlene Blum, *Annapurna: A Woman's Place* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980).
30. Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 160–64. Benares is also written Banaras and Varanasi.
31. See also Stan Stevens, "Sacred and Profane Himalayas," *Natural History* 97, no. 1 (1988), 27–35.
32. Wilfred Noyce, *Climbing the Fish's Tail* (London: Heinemann, 1958).
33. On the treasures and Buddhist deities of Kangchenjunga (*gangs chhen mdzod nga* or *gangs chen mched lnga* in Tibetan), see Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Oracles and Demons, 216–18; and René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz *Where the Gods are Mountains: Three Years among the People of the Himalayas*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Reynal and Co., n.d.), 30–31.
34. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Gods*, 29–30; and Halfdan Siiger, "A Cult for the God of Mount Kanchenjunga among the Lepcha of Northern Sikkim," in *Actes du IVe congrès international des sciences anthropoloqiques et ethnologiques*, vol. 2 (Vienna: Verlag Adolf Holzhausens, 1955), 185–89.
35. On Lhatsun Chembo and the masked dances, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons*, 217 and 402–5; and *Gods*, 31–32, 238–39.
36. On its World Heritage inscription, see https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1513/, accessed Aug. 5, 2019.

2 CHINA

1. By China in this chapter, I refer to the part of the country regarded as the traditional home of the Han Chinese. This excludes the regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, and portions of other areas occupied by minority peoples with different cultures and traditions. I use the modern pinyin system of transliteration in the main text, but older sources referenced in these notes use the Wade-Giles system, which, for example, transliterates the *Dao* as *Tao*.
2. The definition appears in a dictionary written in 121 CE, which draws on older ideas from the Han Dynasty – see Paul Demiéville, "La montagne dans l'art litéraire chinois," *France-Asie/Asia* 20 (1965), 7 and 30, n. 3.
3. *Shujing* 2.3, translated in James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3 (London: Trübner & Co., 1865), 34–37.
4. *Analects* (*Lunyu*), 6.21.

5. Ko Hung, *Pao-p'u tzu nei-p'ien* 17.1a. See Demiéville, "Montagne," 14–15; and Paul W. Kroll, "Verses from on High: The Ascent of Tai Shan," *T'oung Pao* 69, nos. 4–5 (1983), 224. For more on the talismans, see Edouard Chavannes, *Le T'ai chan: essai de monographie d'un culte chinois*, Annales du Musée Guimet 21 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910), 415–24; and William Doub, "Mountains in Early Taoism," in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979), 131–34. A central peak was added to the original four.
6. Xie Lingyun. For a French translation, see Demiéville, "Montagne," 21–22.
7. *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-shan*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 87.
8. See Demiéville, "Montagne," 10, 25.
9. From "My Retreat at Mount Chung-nan," *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology*, trans. Witter Bynner (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 159.
10. See Demiéville, "Montagne," 29; and Mao Tse-Tung *Mao Tsetung Poems* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 18.
11. These mountains are designated with a special character that sets them apart from other sacred mountains in China. Some translate this character as "march-mount" to indicate that the mountains stood on the marches or borders of the empire – see Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: Tang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 6. For overviews of the five peaks, see William Edgar Geil, *The Sacred 5 of China* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1926); and Anna M. Hotchkis and Mary Augusta Mullikan, *The Nine Sacred Mountains of China: An Illustrated Record of Pilgrimages Made in the Years 1935–1936* (Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee Ltd., 1973). *Shan* means "Mount" or "Mountain."
12. For a picture essay on Hua Shan, see Hedda Morrison, *Hua Shan: The Taoist Sacred Mountain in West China* (Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee Ltd., 1973). On Hua Shan and stars, see Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, 132, 136.
13. On hermits and the ascent of Hua Shan, see Bill Porter, *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 60–86.
14. For another translation, see Kroll, "Verses from on High," 232.
15. On the early history of Tai Shan, see Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 16–26.
16. Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 200.
17. On emperors who performed the Feng and Shan sacrifices, see Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 20. On Kang X and Qian Long, see Dwight Condo Baker, *Tai Shan: An Account of the Sacred Eastern Peak of China* (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1925), 183–85, 187–91.
18. Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 9, 281–82.
19. On the importance of Tai Shan in the life of the common people, see Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 102–4. Tai Shan is also discussed as the place of the dead in Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 13–16.
20. According to a personal account told me by Anna Seidel. On the cult of the Princess of Azure Clouds see Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 29–38; and Maspero, *Taoism*, 164–66.
21. *Mencius* 7A.24.
22. Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 63; and Baker, *Tai Shan*, 144–45.
23. Chavannes, *T'ai chan*, 63; and Baker, *Tai Shan*, 144–45.
24. Tao-yün, wife of General Wang Ning-chih, translated in Arthur Waley, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 120.
25. For an overview of the four Buddhist peaks, see Hotchkis and Mullikan, *Nine Sacred Mountains*. The names of these mountains in the Wade-Giles system are: P'u-t'o Shan, Wu-t'ai Shan, O-mei Shan, and Chiu-hua Shan.
26. William Powell, "Literary Diversions on Mount Jiuhua: Cults, Communities and Culture," in *The Sacred Mountains of Asia*,

ed. John Einersen (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 22–26.

27. Raoul Birnbaum, "The Manifestation of a Monastery: Shen-ying's Experiences on Mount Wu-T'ai in a T'ang Context," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 1 (1986), 122. Birnbaum uses "transcendents" for "immortals" as a translation of *hsien*.
28. See Raoul Birnbaum, "Light in the Wutai Mountains," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 195–226.
29. On Manjushri's roles, see Raoul Birnbaum, *Studies on the Mysteries of Manjusri: A Group of East Asian Mandalas and Their Traditional Symbolism*, Society for the Study of Chinese Religions Monograph Series 2 (Boulder, CO: Society for the Study of Chinese Religions, 1983).
30. For descriptions of visions and monasteries, see Birnbaum, "Manifestation of a Monastery" and *Mysteries of Manjusri*. For more recent studies, see Wen-shing Chou, *Mount Wutai: Visions of a Sacred Buddhist Mountain* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Wei-Chen Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).
31. Adapted from Edwin O. Reischauer, trans., *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1955), 225. The episode of the red-maned lion appears in the No play *Shakkyo*, described in Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), 316.
32. Birnbaum told me the story about his experience on Wutai Shan.
33. Reported to me by Lewis Lancaster from his research in Korea.
34. The quote appears in Ronald W. Clark, *Men, Myths and Mountains* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976), 202.
35. *Another Ascent of the World's Highest Peak – Qomolangma* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 4.
36. Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 1–2.

3 CENTRAL ASIA

1. Samuel Beal, trans., *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol. 2, repr. ed. (New York: Paragon, 1968), 325.
2. The project, Mountain Cultural Landscapes in Central Asia, was for The Mountain Institute.
3. For details on Sulaiman-Too, see Jennifer Rose Webster, *"Toward a Sacred Topography of Central Asia: Shrines, Pilgrimage, and Gender in Kyrgyzstan"* (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2015) and the World Heritage nomination file for "Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain" available at https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1230rev.pdf, accessed Nov. 30, 2020.
4. On the Tibetan myth of Shambhala, see Edwin Bernbaum, *The Way to Shambhala* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980).
5. The quote is from the *Shan Hai Jing*, translated in Homer C. Dubs, "An Ancient Chinese Mystery Cult," *Harvard Theological Review* 35, no. 4 (1942), 231. Descriptions of the palace of the immortals appears in Edward T. C. Werner, *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1932), 163–64; and Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 194–96.
6. A full translation of the novel appears in Wu Ch'eng-en, *The Journey to the West*, trans. Anthony C. Yu, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977–83).
7. See Dubs, "Chinese Mystery Cult," and Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London and Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 86–126.
8. On envoys looking for Xiwangmu and the legend of Zhang Qian see Dubs, "Chinese Mystery Cult," 234 n. 20; and Herbert Allen Giles, *A Chinese*

Biographical Dictionary (New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1898), 12–13.

9. James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (London: Pan Books, 1966), 179.
10. For an account of the Amnye Machen area and the ascent of the mountain, see Galen Rowell, *Mountains of the Middle Kingdom* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1983), 132–68.
11. For a detailed study of the area, see Joseph F. Rock, *The Amnye Ma-chhen Range and Adjacent Regions: A Monographic Study*, Serie Orientale Roma, ed. Giuseppe Tucci (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medeo ed Estremo Oriente, 1956). On Machen Pomra, Ganden, and Tsongkhapa, see René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, repr. ed. (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975 [1956]), 209–13.
12. For a study of the Gesar Epic, see Rolf A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1959). Stein points out connections between Gesar and Shambhala and the derivation of Gesar's name in ibid., 524–28 and 279–80. On features of Amnye Machen identified with Gesar, see ibid., 124; and Rock, *Amnye Ma-chhen Range*, 116.
13. See *Great Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and Its Surrounding Sacred Landscape: Nomination (Amended Text)* (2015), 34: https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1440.pdf, accessed Sept. 9, 2021; and Walter Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 102. James Bosson told me about the forgetting of the original names of mountains.
14. *Great Burkhan Khaldun*, 52, 14.
15. *Great Burkhan Khaldun*, 41, 25, 58. The more accurate transliteration is Chinggis Khan; I have used Genghis Khan since it's more familiar.
16. Beal, *Buddhist Records*, vol. 2, 305.
17. M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 46.
18. Stein, *Khotan*, vol. 1, 45; and Sven Hedin, *Through Asia*, vol. 1 (London: Methuen & Co., 1898), 218. *Hazrett* (Hedin's spelling) is a term of respect.
19. On Janaidar and the story of the plums, see Hedin, *Through Asia*, 221, 218–19. Hedin's reports of Kirghiz beliefs and practices regarding Muztagh Ata may not be accurate. When he asked his Kirghiz guide the name of the mountain, the guide may have said simply, "That's an Ice Mountain, Father," addressing Hedin as "Father," a term of respect.
20. M. Aurel Stein, *Sand Buried Ruins of Khotan* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1903), 99.
21. On the climbing history of Muztagh Ata and the ski descent of the mountain, see Rowell, *Mountains of the Middle Kingdom*, 9–11, 24–25.
22. See Jacques Bacot, *Introduction à l'histoire du Tibet* (Paris: Sociéte´Asiatique, 1962), 92.

4 JAPAN

1. Dogen, "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Book XXIX, The Mountains and Rivers Sutra," trans. Carl Bielefeldt, in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979), 47.
2. H. Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendo: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970), 33.
3. Ichiro Hori, "Mountains and Their Importance for the Idea of the Other World," *History of Religions* 6, no. 1 (1966), 9.
4. On mountain shamanism and Ontake, see Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975). For more on *sangaku shinko*, see Earhart, *Haguro*, 7–16.
5. Dogen, 47.
6. Edwin Bernbaum and Nobuko Inaba, "Mountains Divided: The Kii Mountain Range," *World Heritage* 78 (2016), 20–27.
7. For an overview of Shugendo, see Miyake Hiroshi, *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion*, ed. H. Byron Earhart (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan,

2001); and Earhart, *Haguro*. The ritual of hanging a person over the cliff is described in Blacker, *Catalpa Bow*, 216.

8. Translated in *The Manyoshu: The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai Translation of One Thousand Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 215.
9. Sanari Kentaro quoted in Royall Tyler, "A Glimpse of Mt. Fuji in Legend and Cult," *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 1, no. 2 (1981), 140. The most comprehensive study in English on Fuji as a sacred mountain is H. Byron Earhart, *Mount Fuji: Icon of Japan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011).
10. Tyler, "Glimpse," 143. The original shrine, Fuji Hongu Asama Jinja, is located at Fujinomiya on the south side of Mount Fuji.
11. For the story and poem by Saigyo, see Tyler, "Glimpse," 150–51. Kaguya Hime seems to have blended with Konohana Sakuya Hime.
12. Tyler, "Glimpse," 145–46. On Matsudai Shonin and Sengen Daibotsu, see also Earhart, *Fuji*, 26–27.
13. On En no Gyoja, also known as En no Ozuno, see Tyler, "Glimpse," 141–2; Earhart, *Haguro*, 16-21; and Earhart, Fuji, 24–25. The opening of the Shugendo route on Fuji and the early record of deaths on the mountain are described in *Mt. Fuji* (Tokyo: The Japan Times, Ltd., 1970), 101.
14. On the history of the Fuji-ko movement in this and previous paragraphs, see Earhart, *Fuji*, 71–93; and Tyler, "Glimpse," 153–59. On the role of Fuji in the rise of Japanese nationalism, see Earhart, *Fuji*, 118–130; and Frederick Starr, *Fujiyama: The Sacred Mountain of Japan* (Chicago: Covici-McGee Co., 1924), 118–20. Quote from Noritake Tsuda, *Ideals of Japanese Paintings* (Tokyo and Osaka: The Sanseido Company Ltd., 1940), 65.
15. Henry D. Smith shared his notes on Fuji replicas and gave me directions for locating them. The Fuji replicas are described at greater length in Earhart, *Fuji*, 93–96.
16. Interviews with Hiyoshige Ida, Fumiko Umezawa, and Minoru Harashida. On the linking of Konohana Sakuya Hime with Fuji and Fuji-ko, see Henry DeWitt Smith's introduction and commentary in *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji* (New York and Tokyo: George Braziller, 1988), 195.
17. On Alcock, see Earhart, *Fuji*, 111.
18. On Kukai's life, along with translations of some of his major works, see Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kukai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). Kukai and Koya are also discussed in Allan G. Grapard, "Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions," *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982), 195–221; and Hori, "Other World." A more recent study is Philip L. Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008). Kobo Daishi was a title given to Kukai.
19. From *Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings*, translated in Hakeda, *Kukai*, 22–23.
20. There are various versions of the legend. I have drawn this account from Hakeda, *Kukai*, 48; Hori, "Other World," 17; and Yusei Arai, *Odaishi-Sama: A Pictorial History of the Life of Kobo Daishi*, trans. Hiroshi Katayama et al. (Osaka: Koyasan Shuppansha, 1973), 13.
21. Quotes from Kukai translated in Hakeda, *Kukai*, 47.
22. Hakeda, *Kukai*, 50.
23. *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike Monogatari*), trans. Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida, vol. 2 (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1975), 613–14.
24. Hakeda, *Kukai*, 7–8.
25. The projection of the two mandalas onto features of Mount Koya is described in Hakeda, *Kukai,* 50.
26. Grapard, "Flying Mountains," 212. Grapard's article shows how the process of mandalization led to the divinization of the entire country of Japan.

5 SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

1. Mount Abu lies in the Aravalli Mountains in the southwest part of

Rajasthan. The statue of Bahubali stands at Shravana Belagola, carved out of rock on the summit of a mountain in Karnakataka.

2. Adapted from a translation in Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Five Hymns to Sri Arunachala*, 3rd ed. (Sri Ramanasramam, India: Niranjananda Swamy, 1946), 8.
3. On mountain symbolism of Indian temples, see George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); and Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946). On temples of south India and Meru, see P. V. Jagadisa Ayyar, *South Indian Shrines* (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1982).
4. The fourteenth-century Italian monk Giovanni del Marignolli, quoted in Rowland Raven-Hart, *Ceylon: History in Stone* (Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1964), 102.
5. *Mahavamsa* 1.5.77, quoted in Senerat Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1958), 12. Fa-hsien's account appears in James Legge, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdom*, repr. ed. (New York: Paragon Book Reprint and Dover, 1965), 102. On the sapphire, see Raven-Hart, *Ceylon*, 104.
6. On Muslims and Adam's Peak, see Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island*, 4th ed., rev. ed., vol. 2 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 134–36.
7. On the Hindu deities of Adam's Peak and the coming of Shiva, see Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak,* 18–21. On Saint Thomas and the naming of Adam's Peak by the Portuguese, see Tennent, *Ceylon*, 132–33.
8. On the Buddhist deity and names of Adam's Peak, see Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak,* 11–12.
9. Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak,* 17.
10. Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak,* 21. On Vijayabahu and Ibn Batuta, see ibid., 12, 20–21; and Tennent, *Ceylon*, 136.
11. On the legend and history of the chains, see Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak,* 15. On the installation of lights, see ibid., 22; and Raven-Hart, *Ceylon*, 103.
12. On the connections between rulers and sacred mountains in Southeast Asia, see Robert Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, Data Papers 13 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1956); H. G. Quaritch Wales, *The Universe around Them: Cosmology and Cosmic Renewal in Indianized Southeast Asia* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1977); and Paul Wheatley, *Nagara and Commandery: Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions*, Research Papers 207–208 (University of Chicago, Department of Geography, 1983). Burma is known today as Myanmar.
13. On Borobudur and its symbolism, see Luis O. Gomez and Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., eds., *Barabudur: History and Significance of a Buddhism Monument*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 2 (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1981).
14. See A. J. Bernet Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 65–66. Eric Oey provided information on Java and Bali as well as the Eka Dasa Rudra Festival, which he witnessed.
15. On the Balinese myth of the Hindu gods moving from Java, see Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 6.
16. On the significance of Gunung Agung and the northern direction, see Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 76.
17. On the performance of Eka Dasa Rudra, see David J. Stuart Fox, *Once a Century: Pura Besakih and the Eka Dasa Rudra Festival* (Jakarta: Penerbit Citra Indonesia, 1982), 29. For Hindu deities, I have used standard pronunciations rather than the particular Balinese – for example, *Vishnu*, rather than *Wisnu*.
18. Windsor P. Booth and Samuel W. Matthews, "Disaster in Paradise," *National Geographic* 124, no. 3 (1963), 453.
19. Although the climax of the festival occurred in the great sacrifice on

March 28, ceremonies continued until April 23 at Besakih and until May 9 at other places in Bali and Java.

20. These systems of meditation, both Hindu and Buddhist, belong to what is called tantric yoga. For a classic work on yoga with a discussion of the chakras and central channel, see Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard Trask, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1969). The inner symbolism of Meru and Kailas is discussed in Arthur (Sir John Woodroffe) Avalon, trans., *Tantra of the Great Liberation (Mahanirvana Tantra)*, repr. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1972).

6 THE MIDDLE EAST

1. On ziggurats as mountains, see Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 9–25. Clifford points out that while the Egyptians viewed creation as beginning on a primordial hill, probably inspired by the emergence of mounds of land from yearly floods of the Nile, there is no evidence that pyramids were viewed as representations of hills and mountains. Ibid., 25–29.
2. On Zaphon, the Canaanite gods El and Baal, and their influence on biblical conceptions of Sinai and Zion, see Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain,* 34–97, 191–92. Since Zaphon lay north of Israel, its name came to indicate the northern direction in Hebrew.
3. Ps. 125:1–2. Passages from the Old Testament or Tanach are adapted from *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).
4. Deut. 3:25; and Ps. 72:3.
5. Ps. 121:1–3. Some argue that the Psalm casts aspersions on mountains by saying that help comes not from mountains, the reputed abode of Canaanite deities, but from God.
6. Ezek. 28:14, referring to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. This is a later view of the earthly paradise, one not used explicitly in the original description in Genesis.
7. Gen. 22:16–18.
8. Gen. 17:1. El Shaddai appears in most translations of the Bible as "God Almighty," but the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "God, Names of," points out that the term is obscure and probably had the original meaning of "El of the Mountain."
9. Based on field research with Benyamin Tsedaka, a Samaritan leader and authority on the Samaritan religion.
10. Matt. 4:8–10. Passages from the New Testament are adapted from the King James Version of the Bible.
11. Matt. 5:3.
12. Matt. 17:1–3.
13. Matt. 17:5.
14. For a study of the role of mountains in the life of Jesus, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1985).
15. Theodore Studium in Heinz Skrobucha, *Sinai*, trans. Geoffrey Hunt (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2.
16. Qur'an 96:1–5, *The Qur'an: a New Translation*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The Qur'an is also written Quran and Koran.
17. Qur'an 2:93 and 7:171; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954), 92.
18. For accounts of the revelation on Hira and the night journey, see Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 43–42, 101–103.
19. See Richard C. Martin, "Muslim Pilgrimage," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986), 344.
20. From Al-Ghazzali, *Mishkat Al-Anwar* (*The Niche for Lights*), translated in Skrobucha, *Sinai*, 2.
21. James Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat*, 4th ed. rev. (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1896), 298. Qaf

also appears in written sources as Kaf. On the role of Qaf in Sufi mysticism, see Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, Bollingen Series XCI: 2 (Princeton University Press, 1977), 73 ff.

22. On Zoroastrian cosmology and mountains, see Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 130–46. Qaf appears in the *Bundahishn* 12.17, translated in *Zand-Akasih, Iranian or Greater Bundahishn*, trans. B. T. Ankelsaria (Bombay: 1956), 95. On the identification of Qaf with Elburz, see Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 74.
23. On the crossing of the Chinvat Bridge, see Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 28; Boyce, *A History*, 237–41; and Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, trans. Willard Trask, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 329–31.
24. On the identification of the modern Elburz range with Hara Berezaiti, see Boyce, *A History*, 143–44. *Bundahishn* 9.34 mentions Damavand and refers to a demon there. A more recent version of the myth is recounted in Duncan Forbes, *The Heart of Iran* (London: Robert Hale, 1963), 59–61.
25. Gen. 8:3–4. References to the land of Ararat occur in 2 Kings 19:37 and Isa. 37:38.
26. For a study of Armenian history and culture with references to Ararat and Urartu, see David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization*, 3rd ed. corrected (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980). On local features and the story of Noah, see Bryce, *Transcaucasia*, 222.
27. Bryce, *Transcaucasia*, 309–10. Bryce also recounts the story of the monk in ibid., 220.
28. Dr. J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 290
29. Exod. 19:16–20.
30. See Exod. 3:1–13.
31. Emmanuel Anati argues for the Negev in *The Mountain of God* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986).
32. From Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaeorum*, translated in Skrobucha, *Sinai*, 12.
33. Deut. 4:9–12.
34. Nilus Sinaita, quoted in Skrobucha, *Sinai*, 31.
35. For a history of the monastery and its influence, see Skrobucha, *Sinai*. The Saint Catherine Area is now a World Heritage site – for more on the monastery and site, see the nomination file at https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/954/documents/, accessed Nov. 30, 2020.
36. Lance Morrow, "Trashing Mount Sinai," *Time* (Mar. 19, 1990), 92.
37. On David and the stronghold of Zion, see 1 Chron. 11:4–7. The hill erroneously identified as Mount Zion today was part of the Temple Mount accidentally left out of the city walls when they were rebuilt in the sixteenth century under Suleiman the Magnificent.
38. Ps. 48:2–3.
39. Ps. 50:2–3.
40. On Solomon and the construction of the temple on Mount Moriah, see 2 Chron. 3:1.
41. Isa. 2:2–4.
42. "The Burning of Al-Aqsa," *Time* (Aug. 29, 1969), 1. Dr. Subhi Abu-Ghosh, Director, Shar'iyah Courts, Jerusalem.
43. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, Chicago, New York: Winston Press, Seabury Book, 1985) contrasts the two mountains as Sinai the mountain of the covenant and Zion the mountain of the temple. I have drawn on his work and added ideas of my own. Another book that deals with the symbolism of Sinai and Zion is Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies*, AAR Studies in Religion 23 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).
44. Ps. 43:3.

7 EUROPE

1. On female characteristics of mountains and the orientation of temples in Minoan civilization, see Vincent Scully,

The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 9–19. Information on the Classical deities in the following sections can be found in any number of reference works on Greek and Roman mythology. I have used the Greek versions of mountain names, such as Olympos and Parnassos, rather than the latinized Olympus and Parnassus.

2. *Iliad* 15.189–93, 8.25–26. In Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, Mentor repr. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1942), 25, Hamilton points out that since Olympos is common to all three deities it is not simply heaven.
3. *Iliad* 1.495–499, translated in *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 72.
4. For example, *Theogony* 62–63, 793–94.
5. *Iliad* 8.409–12.
6. *Odyssey* 6.44–47, translated in Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1963), 100.
7. *Iliad* 14.225–26. On the meaning of Olympos, see Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 234–37.
8. Hermann-Josef Höper, "Zwei Staatuenbasen als Reste einer Opferstatte auf dem HI. Antonios, einem der Olympgipfel (Griechenland)," in O. Brehm and S. Klie, eds., *Festschrift für Max Wegner zum 90. Geburstag* (Bonn 1992), 213–22.
9. Rita Charitakis and Constantin Tsipiras, "Mount Olympus: The Power of a Cultural Symbol" in *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority*, ed. Jack Ives and Bruno Messerli (Oxford: Parthenon, 1997), 42–43; and François Labande, *Sauver la montagne* (Geneva: Editions Olizane, 2004), 105–10.
10. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.141–143.
11. Philip Sherrard, *Athos: The Holy Mountain* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1985), 12.
12. Sherrard, *Athos*, 14–15.
13. Quote from Comnenos in Sherrard, *Athos*, 22.
14. Konstantine Daponte, *The Garden of Graces*, translated in Sherrard, *Athos*, 145.
15. For a French translation, see Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Hymnes*, vol. 1, ed. Johannes Koder, Sources Chrétiennes 156 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969), Hymn 3.
16. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean Young (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 37. Hlidskjalf may mean "the hill, rock with an opening in it," according to Edward Oswald Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, repr. ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 64.
17. Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 46, 54, 87.
18. For the derivation of *valhalla*, see Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 55. The quote comes from *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Edinburgh: Southside, 1973), 41, and the shepherd's vision from ibid., 51.
19. On the frost giants and Skadi and the sea god Njord, see Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 87, 52.
20. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. Philip Wayne (Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), 172.
21. On the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Sídh, see John A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 63 ff., 372 ff.; and Proinsias Mac Cana, "Sídh," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986), 314–15. On the cauldron of plenty as the Grail, see MacCulloch, *Ancient Celts*, 382–83; and Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).
22. On the tradition recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth, see Ann Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 278. On mountains and Rhita Gawr and Brenin LLwyd, see Amory B. Lovins, *Eryri: The Mountains of Longing* (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth, 1971), 32.

23. On Gwynn and Saint Collen, see MacCulloch, *Ancient Celts*, 115; and S. Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, vol. 2 (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1908), 258–60.
24. On contemporary interest in Glastonbury Tor and the labyrinth hypothesis, see Geoffrey Ashe, *Avalonian Quest* (Bungay, UK: Fontana, 1984); and Greg Stafford, "The Labyrinth and Tor of Glastonbury," *Shaman's Drum*, no. 9 (1987), 40–43.
25. On Croagh Patrick, see Brian de Breffny, *The Land of Ireland* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1973 ed., s.v. "Croagh Patrick." The pilgrimage is described in Daphne Pochin Mould, *Irish Pilgrimage* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), 133–40.
26. John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 256.
27. Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, 6th ed., vol. 1 (London: John Hooke, 1726), 194–96.
28. Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 188–89.
29. Joseph Addision, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, in *Works*, vol. 2, ed. George Washington Green (New York, 1854), 339–40.
30. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. Basil Worsfold (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), 161.
31. See Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963); and, more recently, Jon Matthieu, "The Sacralization of Mountains in Europe during the Modern Age," *Mountain Research and Development* 26 no. 4 (2006), 343–49; and Jon Matthieu, *The Third Dimension, A Comparative History of Mountains in the Modern Era* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011). Nicholson's interpretation has been particularly influential.
32. From a letter to Father Denis di Borgo San Sepulcro quoted in Francis Gribble, *The Early Mountaineers* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), 21–23.
33. On early German ascents, see Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom*, 49 n. 17. On Roche Melon and its shrine, see *Standard Encylopedia of the World's Mountains*, ed. Anthony Huxley (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), 260; and Gribble, *Early Mountaineers*, 5–13.
34. Letter to Jacob Avienus in Conrad Gesner, *On the Admiration of Mountains*, trans. H. B. D. Soulé (San Francisco: The Grabhorn Press, 1937), 5.
35. On Pilate and Mount Pilatus, see Gribble, *Early Mountaineers*, 43–62; and Gesner, *Admiration*, 33–36.
36. On Scheuzer's view of dragons, see Yi-fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 80; and Gavin Rylands de Beer, *Early Travellers in the Alps* (London: Sidwick & Jackson, 1930), 89–90.
37. Tuan, *Landscapes*, 79–80, 109–10.
38. For a compilation of these legends and beliefs, see Paul Gayet-Tancrède (Samivel), *Hommes, cimes et dieux: les grandes mythologies de l'altitude et la légende dorée des montagnes à travers le monde* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973), 136–39.
39. Guido Rey, *The Matterhorn*, trans. J. E. C. Eaton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 36–37; and Henri Correvon, "Au pied du Cervin," *Bulletin de l'Association pour la protection des plantes*, no. 4 (1896), 19.
40. Gayet-Tancrède, *Hommes*, 127–28, quoting a sixteenth-century account by Josias Simmler in William A. B. Coolidge, *Josias Simler et les origines de l'alpinisme jusqu'en 1600* (Grenoble: Allier Freres, 1904).
41. Letters of Nov. 4 and Oct. 27, 1799, adapted from English and French in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Miscellaneous Travels of J. W. Goethe*, ed. L. Dora Schmitz and trans. A. J. W. Morrison (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 30, 25; and *Voyages en Suisse et en Italie*, trans. Jacques Porchat (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1878), 30–31, 25.
42. From "Mont Blanc: Lines Written In The Vale Of Chamouni," in *The Complete Poetical Works Of Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 584–586.
43. The two quotes are from Horace Bénédict de Saussure, *Voyages dans les*

Alpes, 4 vols. (Neuchatel: Louis Fauche-Borel, 1779–96), translated in R. L. G. Irving, *The Romance of Mountaineering* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1935), 21, 39.

44. Gaston Rébuffat, *Mont Blanc to Everest*, trans. Geoffrey Sutton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 13.
45. "France's Macron vows to protect Mont Blanc from overcrowding," www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51487851, accessed Sept. 5, 2020; "Italy upset with France over Mont Blanc protection zone," www.euronews.com/2020/10/22/italy-upset-with-france-over-mont-blanc-protection-zone, accessed Aug. 24, 2021.
46. On the *sacri monti*, see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 436–42.
47. H. E. M. Stutfield, "Mountaineering as a Religion," *The Alpine Journal* 32, no. 218 (1918), 241–47; and F. T. Wethered, "Correspondence," *The Alpine Journal* 32, no. 219 (1919), 403–4.

8 AFRICA

1. On the San and the Tsodilo Hills, see Alf Annenburgh, *The Bushmen* (Cape Town, Johannesburg: C. Struik Publishers, 1979), 14–15, 143.
2. *Metamorphosis* 4.655 ff., translated in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).
3. Henry M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 429.
4. Filippo de Filippi, *Ruwenzori: An Account of the Expedition of H. R. H. Prince Luigi Amedeo of Savoy, Duke of the Abruzzi* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1909), 133.
5. See Dian Fossey, *Gorillas in the Mist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 36–41.
6. On the Masai and Ol Doinyo Lengai, see Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), 152; and Tepilit Ole Saitoti and Carol Beckwith, *Maasai* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980), 17. For an overview of Masai religion, see Hans-Egil Hauge, *Maasai Religion and Folklore* (Nairobi, Kenya: City Printing Works, 1979). *Masai* is also spelled *Maasai*.
7. On the Sonjo and Ol Doinyo Lengai, see Robert F. Gray, *The Sonjo of Tanganyika: An Anthropological Study of an Irrigation-Based Society* (London and New York: International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1963), 24, 97–98, 106–7.
8. The myth was told to me by Willy Makundi. According to other versions of the story, Kibo and Mawenzi were brothers smoking pipes (Dr. R. Reusch in *Ice Cap* no. 1, quoted in Iain Allan, *Guide to Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro* [Nairobi: Mountain Club of Kenya, 1981], 282) or two men tending fires (Bruno Gutmann, "Chagga Folk-Lore," in *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, ed. J. A. Hutchinson, rev. ed. [Dar Es Salaam: Tanzania Society, 1974], 50). *Mawenzi* or *Kimawenzi* means "having a broken top" according to some sources. *Kilimanjaro* is an artificial word made up by outsiders: see J. A. Hutchinson, "The Meaning of Kilimanjaro," in *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 65–67.
9. Willy Makundi. On Chagga history, see Kathleen M. Stahl, *History of the Chagga People of Kilimanjaro* (London and the Hague: Mouton & Co., 1964).
10. Charles Dundas, *Kilimanjaro and Its People: A History of the Wachagga, Their Laws, Customs and Legends, together with Some Account of the Highest Mountain in Africa*, repr. ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968), 33–35.
11. Old customs according to Dundas, *Kilimanjaro*, 38–9, 192. Willy Makundi told me about the altars in Christian churches.
12. Dr. R. Reusch, "Mount Kilimanjaro and Its Ascent," in *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 131–32.
13. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938). Kenyatta tells the origin myth in ibid., 3–6. *Gikuyu* is the spelling closer to the actual pronunciation of the name, but it appears

in most written sources as *Kikuyu*, so I have used the latter.
14. Kenyatta, *Facing*, 203.
15. Kenyatta, *Facing*, 244–49.
16. Gary Smith, "A Day in the Life of Mount Kenya," *Sports Illustrated* 62, no. 21 (1985), 70.
17. See Kiboi Muriithi and Peter Ndoria, *War in the Forest: The Autobiography of a Mau Mau Leader* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971); and Smith, "Day in the Life," 68–69.
18. Jacob Kamau, quoted in Smith, "Day in the Life," 82.
19. For accounts of this episode see Smith, "Day in the Life," 82; and "Climbers on Mt. Kenya Search for Lost African," *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 1979), 6. Iain Allan gave me additional information about the incident.
20. Eric Shipton, *Upon that Mountain*, reprinted in *The Six Mountain-Travel Books*, ed. Jim Perrin (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1985), 360.
21. Joseph Thomson, *Through Masai Land*, 3rd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968), 222.
22. For Nyerere's proclamation and a photograph of a climber on the summit on the night of independence, see *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, frontispiece. Two years later Tanganyika formed a union with Zanzibar and its name was changed to Tanzania.
23. In 1985 Ian Howell had climbed Mount Kenya more times than any other person according to Smith, "Day in the Life," 68.

9 NORTH AMERICA

1. John Muir, *The Yosemite*, repr. ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988 [1914]), 4.
2. I use "Native American" and "American Indian" or "Indian" interchangeably since many Native Americans prefer to call themselves Indians. The museum at the Smithsonian Institution created by representatives of many different tribes is called the Museum of the American Indian.
3. Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 45. On various Indigenous names of the mountain, see James Kari, "The Tenada-Denali-Mount McKinley Controversy," *Alaska Native Magazine* (Oct. 1985), 13–14. Some variants on the names are Denaze, Denadhe, Dengadh, and Dghelaay Ce'e.
4. Julius Jetté, "On Ten'a Folklore," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), 312–13.
5. Frederica de Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 95; and Douglas Deur, Thomas Thornton, Rachel Lahoff, and Jamie Hebert, *Yakutat Tlingit and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve: An Ethnographic Overview and Assessment* (National Park Service, 2015), 34, 52, www.npshistory.com/publications/wrst/eoa-yakutat-tlingit.pdf.
6. De Laguna, *Saint Elias*, 252.
7. De Laguna, *Saint Elias*, 237, 323, 440, 3: Pls. 144 and 216, 1303. On the Mount Saint Elias Dancers, see Deur et al, *Yakutat Tlingit*, 129, 211–12.
8. De Laguna, *Saint Elias*, 819.
9. On glacier spirits and looking at mountains, see De Laguna, *Saint Elias*, 818–19. On Tlingit reactions to the surges, see *Newsweek* (Aug. 25, 1986), 53.
10. Theodore Winthrop, "Tacoma and the Indian Legend of Hamitchou," in *Mount Rainier: A Record of Exploration*, ed. Edmond S. Meany (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 38–39. There is a discussion on the various Indian names of Mount Rainier in Ella E. Clark, *Indian Legends of the Northwest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 27–28. I have used *tacoma* as the most familiar rendition of *takhoma*, *tacoman*, etc.
11. Sluiskin, "Indian Warning against Demons," in Meany, *Mount Rainier*, 133–34.
12. Drawn from four myths of the Duwamish, Skikomish, Puyallup, and

Nisqually tribes recorded in Clark, *Indian Legends*, 28–31. The sources Clark used are of varying reliability.

13. Clark, *Indian Legends*, 31–32.
14. Cecilia Svinth Carpenter, *Where the Waters Begin: The Traditional Nisqually Indian History of Mount Rainier* (Seattle: Discover Your Northwest, 2015), 103.
15. Sue Koeteeuw, introductory text, in Josef Scalylea, *Moods of the Mountain*, rev. ed. (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1979), frontispiece; Mark Glickman, "A Rabbi's View," in Ruth Kirk, *Sunrise to Paradise: The Story of Mount Rainier National Park* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), 4.
16. From personal reports and observations.
17. Joaquin Miller, *Unwritten History: Life amongst the Modocs* (Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1874), 264–76.
18. Clark, *Indian Legends*, 12; and Roland Dixon, "Shasta Myths," *Journal of American Folklore* 23 (1910), 36.
19. See Lynn Huntsinger and María Fernández-Giménez, "Spiritual Pilgrims at Mount Shasta, California," *Geographical Review* 90, no. 4 (2000), 536–58. Other information came from reports I heard from American Indians about ceremonies on Shasta.
20. Alex Barnum, "Blow to Plan for Shasta Ski Resort/Forest Service official says no," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Feb. 20, 1998), www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/Blow-to-Plan-For-Shasta-Ski-Resort-Forest-3012617.php.
21. John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (Garden City, NY: The Natural History Library/Anchor Books, 1961), 2–3.
22. Muir, *Mountains of California*, 2; and John Muir, "Explorations in the Great Tuolumne Cañon," in *Voices for the Earth: A Treasury of the Sierra Club Bulletin*, ed. Ann Gilliam (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1979), 5.
23. Muir, "Explorations, 7–8. On the Sierra Nevada and Mount Sinai, see Linnie Marsh Wolfe, ed., *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, repr. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979 [1938]), 92. The quote on Cathedral Peak comes from John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, repr. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1987 [1911]), 198.
24. Muir, *Mountains of California*, 51–52.
25. For Hoavadunaki's account, see Malcolm Margolin, ed., *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories and Songs* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1981), 89–91.
26. On Crazy Horse's vision, see John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, repr. ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1972 [1932]), 70–72. For the Lakota vision quest, see Raymond J. DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the 19th Century," in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 33–42. I have used "he" since traditionally in the past only men went on vision quests; now women do too.
27. See Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), 62–63.
28. Chief John Snow, *These Mountains are our Sacred Places: The Story of the Stoney People* (Toronto and Sarasota: Samuel Stevens, 1977), 13.
29. Traditions on Crazy Horse, Custer, and Bear Butte attributed to the Lakota come from Richard B. Williams in a paper compiled by him and obtained by David Reigle in Sturgis, South Dakota. This source may or may not be reliable.
30. On Bear Butte, Sweet Medicine, and the sacred arrows, see Father Peter John Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).
31. On the meanings of various tribal names for Devils Tower, see www.nps.gov/deto/learn/historyculture/sacredsite.htm, accessed July 27, 2020.
32. On the story of the girls, see www.nps.gov/deto/learn/historyculture/first-stories.htm, accessed July 27, 2020. On Sweetwater, see www.nps.gov/deto/learn/historyculture/sacredsite.htm.
33. Chris Kalman, "It's Time to Rethink Climbing on Devils Tower," *Outside*

Online (July 25, 2018), www.outsideonline.com/2298706/community-rocks; and "Climbers: Honor the June Closure at Devil's Tower," *Access Fund* (May 11, 2021), www.accessfund.org/news-and-events/news/climbers-honor-the-june-closure-at-devils-tower. See also Matthew Glass, "Devils Tower, Mato Tipi or Bear's Lodge (Wyoming)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R. Taylor (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 477–79.

34. On the Tewa Pueblos, see Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969); and Alfonso Ortiz, "Look to the Mountaintop," in *Essays on Reflection*, ed. E. Graham Ward (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).
35. Adapted from Washington Matthews, *Navajo Legends*, Memoirs, vol. 5 (Boston: American Folklore Society, 1897), 78–79.
36. Personal interview with Wilson Aronilth, Jr., at Tsaile, Arizona.
37. Blessing Way Chant according to Slim Curly, recorded and translated in Leland C. Wyman, *Blessingway* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1970), 150.
38. Quote from Philip Hyde and Stephen C. Jett, *Navajo Wildlands* (San Francisco: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books, 1969), 50.
39. Quotes from George Blue Eyes, quoted in "Native Peoples of the Southwest: The Permanent Collection of the Heard Museum," exhibit in Phoenix, Arizona and personal interview with Wilson Aronilth, Jr. John Wood told me about the view of the San Francisco Peaks as a woman.
40. For Navajo Mountain and its significance for the Navajo, see Karl W. Luckert, *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion* (Flagstaff, AZ: Museum of Northern Arizona, 1977).
41. Edmund Nequatewa, "Chaveyo: The First Kachina," *Plateau* 20, no. 4 (1948), 60–62. On *katsinas* in relation to Hopi religion, see Armin W. Geertz, "A Reed Pierced the Sky: Hopi Indian Cosmography on Third Mesa, Arizona," *Numen* 31, no.2 (1984), 216–41. *Katsina* is often written *kachina*.
42. The Hopi individuals with whom I spoke about the San Francisco Peaks and the *katsinas* requested that I not mention their names.
43. Emory Sekaguaptewa, Jr., quoted in John Dunklee, "Man-Land Relationships on the San Francisco Peaks" (Flagstaff, AZ: Submitted to the Museum of Northern Arizona Technical Series, n. d.), 75.
44. On this and other controversies around sacred mountains, see Lawrence S. Hamilton, "When the Sacred Encounters Economic Development in Mountains," *The George Wright Forum* 32, no.2 (2015), 132–40; as well as Adam Duntsan, "Victims of 'Adaptation': Climate Change, Sacred Mountains, and Perverse Resilience," *Journal of Political Ecology* 26 (2019), 704–19.
45. On Mount Mitchell, see James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, Annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, vol. 19, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900), 242–44, 431–32. On the Seneca, see Frederick Houghton, "The Traditional Origin and the Naming of the Seneca Nation," *American Anthropologist* 24, no. 1 (1922), 31–33.
46. Freeman Owle, "The Magic Lake," in *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, ed. Barbara Duncan (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 205–7.
47. See Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, "The Katahdin Legends," *Appalachia* 16, no.1 (1924), 39–52. Many of the legends Eckstorm recorded suffered distortion.
48. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, repr. ed. (New York: Bramhall House, 1950 [1848]), 271.
49. Henry James III, ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 2 (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), 76–77.
50. David Lujan, Director of the Tonantzin Land Institute in Albuquerque, told me about plans to mine at Red Butte. On the Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine, see John Berger, *Restoring the Earth* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1987),

102–5; and *Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine Reclamation Project: Environmental Impact Statement*, 2 vols. (US Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management: Albuquerque, 1986). Paul Robinson, Research Director at the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque, told me about uranium mining around Mount Taylor and restoration work at the mine as of 1989. I also spoke with local people and staff at the New Mexico Museum of Mining in Grants.

10 LATIN AMERICA

1. Beliefs and story about Auyantepui that I recorded from Pemón informants.
2. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*, trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 51.
3. Bernardino de Sahagún, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, trans. Fanny R. Bandelier (Nashville, TN: Fisk University Press, 1932), 45–46.
4. Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex, Book 2 – The Ceremonies*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 2nd ed. rev., Monographs of the School of American Research 14, pt. 3 (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1981), 44. The details of practices preceding the quote come from Sahagún, *History of Ancient Mexico*, 51–52, 72–73.
5. Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 255–57.
6. Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 248–50.
7. Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 250 n. 2; and José Luis Lorenzo, *Las Zonas Arqueológicas de los Volcanes Iztaccíhuatl y Popocatépetl*, Series Publication no. 3 (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1957), 16–20.
8. George F. Mobley, "Las Sierras, los Volcanes," in *America's Magnificent Mountains* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1980), 149–52.
9. The relationship between pyramids and sacred mountains in Aztec culture is analyzed in Richard Fraser Townsend, "Pyramid and Sacred Mountain," in *Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the American Tropics*, ed. Anthony F. Aveni and Gary Urton (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1982), 37–62.
10. Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 155.
11. On the archaeological expedition, see Charles Wicke and Fernando Horcasitas, "Archeological Investigations on Monte Tlaloc, Mexico," *Mesoamerican Notes* 5 (1957), 83–93.
12. Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 156–60.
13. On Chavín and Tiahuanaco and mountains and mountain deities, see Johan Reinhard, "Chavín and Tiahuanaco: A New Look at Two Andean Ceremonial Centers," *National Geographic Research* 1, no. 3 (1985), 395–422.
14. For this and the next paragraph, see Evelio Echevarría, "The Inca Mountaineers: 1400–1800," in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979), 121–22. Johan Reinhard told me that Llullaillaco had already been climbed in 1950 and 1951.
15. Echevarría, "Inca Mountaineers," 120–21; and Reinhard, "High Altitude Archeology," 59.
16. See Johan Reinhard, *The Ice Maiden: Inca Mummies, Mountain Gods, and Sacred Sites in the Andes* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2005).
17. See Johan Reinhard and Maria Constanza Ceruti, *Inca Rituals and Sacred Mountains: A Study of the World's Highest Archeological Sites* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archeology Press, 2010).
18. On Reinhard's research and theories see his articles: "High Altitude Archeology," 54–67; and "Sacred Mountains: An Ethno-archaeological Study of High Andean Ruins," *Mountain Research and Development* 5, no. 4 (1985), 299–317; as well as more recent research in Reinhard, *The Ice Maiden* and Reinhard and Ceruti, *Inca Rituals*.
19. On Andean mountain beliefs and contemporary practices, see references in the preceding note.

20. Personal interviews about *curanderos* and *apus* with the Peruvian anthropologist, Washington Rozas Alvarez, and the *curanderos*, Narcisso Ccahuana and Jesus Qhana T'ito, in Cuzco.
21. Joseph William Bastien, *Mountain of the Condor: Metaphor and Ritual in an Andean Ayllu*, American Ethnological Society Monographs 64 (St. Paul: West Pub. Co, 1978), 72–73.
22. On the legend of the flood and the story of Huascarán and Huandoy, see Evelio Echevarría, "Legends of the High Andes," *The Alpine Journal* 88, no. 332 (1983), 89–90.
23. On Chimborazo, Tungurahua, and the Puruhá, see Hermann Trimborn, "South Central America and the Andean Civilizations," in *Pre-Columbian Religions*, ed. W. Krickeberg et al. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 97.
24. Simón Bolívar, "Mi delirio sobre el Chimborazo," in *Papeles de Bolívar*, ed. Vicente Lecuna (Caracas: Litografía del Comercio, 1917), 233–34. On Humboldt, Chimborazo, and Bolívar, see Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 144–62. Charles-Marie de la Condamine was a French scientist who reached a lower altitude on Chimborazo in the 1730s.
25. See Michael J. Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cusco* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 32 and 35.
26. Bernard Mishkin, "Cosmological Ideas among the Indians of the Southern Andes," *Journal of American Folklore* 53, no. 210 (1940), 237–38.
27. On Qoyllur Rit'i, see Robert Randall, "Return of the Pleiades," *Natural History* 96, no. 6 (1987), 42–53. For another interpretation of the pilgrimage, see Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes*, 207–42.
28. Joseph William Bastien, *Mountain of the Condor: Metaphor and Ritual in an Andean Ayllu*, American Ethnological Society Monographs 64 (St. Paul: West Pub. Co, 1978), xix.
29. On the Qollahuaya and Mount Kaata, see Bastien, *Mountain of the Condor*; and Joseph William Bastien, "The Human Mountain," in *Mountain People*, ed. Michael Tobias (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 45–57.
30. Translated in Danilo Villafañe, "Caring for the 'Heart of the World', Colombia," in *Protected Landscapes and Cultural and Spiritual Values*, ed. Josep-Maria Mallarach (Heidelberg: Kasparek Verlag, 2008), 170.
31. See Juan Mayr, "Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia: Indigenous Territories in a Complex Scenario," in *Linking Universal and Local Values: Managing a Sustainable Future for World Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2004), 155–158; Guillermo E. Rodriquez-Navarro, "Sacred Natural Sites in Zones of Armed Conflicts: The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia," in *Sacred Species and Sites: Advances in Biocultural Conservation*, ed. Gloria Pungetti, Gonzalo Oviedo, and Della Hooke (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152–164; and Alan Ereira, *The Elder Brothers* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
32. Johan Reinhard, *The Nazca Lines: A New Perspective on Their Origin and Meaning*, 2nd ed. (Lima: Editorial Los Pinos, 1986). See also Evan Hadingham, *Lines to the Mountain Gods: Nazca and the Mysteries of Peru* (New York: Random House, 1987).
33. See Johan Reinhard, *Machu Picchu: Exploring an Ancient Sacred Center*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2007).
34. On Coropuna and Saint Peter, see Reinhard, "High Altitude Archeology," 61.
35. On the Virgin of Guadalupe, see Ena Campbell, "The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female Self-Image: A Mexican Case History," in *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 6–24; and Eric Wolfe, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958), 34–39. On crosses on sacred mountains in Chiapas,

see Evon Z. Vogt and Catherine C. Vogt, "Lévi-Strauss among the Maya," *Man* 5, no. 3 (1970), 379–92; and Walter F. Morris, Jr., *Living Maya* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987).

11 OCEANIA

1. Some definitions of Oceania limit the area to the three islands groups of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, but others also include Australia, as I have done.
2. On the John Frum Cult, see Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), 152–60; and Kal Muller, "Tanna Awaits the Coming of John Frum," *National Geographic* 145, no. 5 (1974), 706–15.
3. Chris Clarkson, Zenobia Jacobs, Ben Marwick, et al., "Human Occupation of Northern Australia by 65,000 Years Ago," *Nature* 547 (July 20, 2017), 306–10.
4. Robert Layton, *Uluru: An Aboriginal History of Uluru* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986), 5.
5. Layton, *Uluru*, 7–9; and Charles P. Mountford, *Ayers Rock: Its People, Their Beliefs and Their Art* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1965), 31–68.
6. On the remark by a man of the Kikingkura, see Layton, *Uluru*, 15.
7. Anne Clarke and Emma Waterton, "A Journey to the Heart: Affecting Engagement at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park," *Landscape Research* 40, no. 8 (2016), 971–92; and "Uluru climb closure," Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, https://parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/discover/culture/uluru-climb/, accessed July 28, 2020.
8. Teuira Henry, *Ancient Tahiti*, Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 48 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1928), 200–1.
9. Margaret Orbell, *Hawaiki: A New Approach to Maori Tradition* (Christchurch: The University of Canterbury, 1985), 60–63; and *The Natural World of the Maori* (Auckland: Collins/Bateman, 1985), 111.
10. Conversations with Peter Ruka. See also "Aoraki – Ancestral Mountain," https://arowhenua.org/blog/aoraki, accessed July 28, 2020; and *Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park* (Christchurch: Depart of Conservation, 2019), 5–6, www.doc.govt.nz/documents/getting-involved/students-and-teachers/field-trips-by-region/canterbury/aoraki/aoraki-mt-cook-education-resource-colour.pdf, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
11. Interviews with Rakeipoho Taiaroa and Te Ngaehe Wanikau. See also Orbell, *Hawaiki*, 54–55.
12. Orbell, *Hawaiki*, 53.
13. Orbell, *Natural World*, 85.
14. Orbell, *Natural World*, 86.
15. Orbell, *Natural World*, 129–30.
16. Melissa F. Baird, "'The Breath of the Mountain Is My Heart': Indigenous Cultural Landscapes and the Politics of Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013), 329. On the use of mountains in introductory phrases, see Hong-Key Yoon, *Maori Mind, Maori Land: Essays on the Cultural Geography of the Maori People from an Outsider's Perspective* (Berne, New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1986), 41–59.
17. *Tongariro National Park Management Plan 2006 – 2016* (Turangi: Department of Conservation, 2006), 27, www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/about-doc/role/policies-and-plans/national-park-management-plans/tongariro-national-park/tongariro-national-park-management-plan.pdf, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
18. For an account of Rua and his movement, see Peter Webster, *Rua and the Maori Millennium* (Wellington, NZ: Victoria University, 1979).
19. Harry Dansey, "A View of Death," in *Te Ao Hurihuri, the World Moves on: Aspects of Maoritanga*, ed. Michael King (Auckland, NZ: Longman Paul, 1981), 141.
20. Martha Warren Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 54–55.
21. Nathaniel Bright Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 38 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 188.

22. See H. Arlo Nimmo, "Pele's Journey to Hawai'i: An Analysis of the Myths," *Pacific Studies* 11, no. 1 (1987), 1–42.
23. Emerson, *Unwritten Literature*, 195.
24. W. D. Westervelt, *Hawaiian Legends of Volcanoes* (Boston: Ellis Press, 1916), 33–34.
25. For stories about encounters with Pele, see H. Arlo Nimmo, "Pele, Ancient Goddess of Contemporary Hawaii," *Pacific Studies* 9, no. 2 (1986), 121–79.
26. Christie Wilson, "Volcanoes Park Seeks New Portraits of Pele," *Honolulu Advertiser* (May 27, 2003).
27. Jeremy Spoon, "The 'Visions of Pele' Competition and Exhibit at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 4, no. 2 (2007), 72–74.
28. Westervelt, *Hawaiian Legends*, 59–62. Westervelt may have romanticized some of his accounts of Hawaiian myths.
29. Alfons L. Korn and Mary Kawena Pukui, eds. and trans. *The Echo of Our Song: Chants and Poems of the Hawaiians* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1979); and Kepa Maly and Onaona Maly, *"Mauna Kea – Ka Piko Kaulana o Ka 'a ina" (Mauna Kea – the Famous Summit of the Land): A Collection of Native Traditions, Historical Accounts, and Oral History Interviews for: Mauna Kea, the Lands of Ka'ohe, Humu'ula and the 'a ina Mauna on the Island of Hawai'i* (Hilo: Kumu Pono Associates, LLC, 2005), 9.
30. See Maly, "Mauna Kea," v-vi; and Leon No'eau Peralto, "Portrait. Mauna a Wākea: Hānau ka Mauna, the Piko of Our Ea," in *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty*, ed. Ikaika Hussey et al. (Panama: Duke University Press, 2014), 232–43.
31. Kealoha Pisciotta, "Witness Direct Testimony" (June 28, 2011), 10, https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/mk/files/2016/10/B.01a-Kealoha-Pisciotta-WDT-2016-C-1-amend.pdf, accessed Sept. 9, 2021; and Maly, "Mauna Kea," vi, on waters of Kane. Other information from personal conversation with Tom Peek on the importance of Lake Waiau.
32. On adverse impacts of the TMT on religious practices see Pisciotta, "Witness Direct Testimony"; and Pualani Case, "Written Direct Testimony of B. Pualani Case," https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/mk/files/2016/10/B.21a-wdt-Case.pdf, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
33. Dennis Overbye, "Under Hawaii's Starriest Skies, a Fight over Sacred Ground," *New York Times* (Oct. 3, 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/10/04/science/hawaii-thirty-meter-telescope-mauna-kea.html?searchResultPosition=1, accessed Sept. 9, 2021; and Frances Nguyen, "The Pandemic Hasn't Stopped Native Hawaiians' Fight to Protect Maunakea," *Vox* (Aug. 7, 2020), www.vox.com/2020/8/7/21354619/mauna-kea-tmt-telescope-native-hawaiians, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
34. See Adrienne LaFrance, "What Makes a Volcano Sacred?" *The Atlantic* (Oct. 30, 2015), www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/what-makes-a-volcano-sacred/413203/, accessed Sept. 9, 2021; and "Indigenous Religious Traditions – Mauna Kea," https://sites.coloradocollege.edu/indigenoustraditions/sacred-lands/sacred-lands-mauna-kea/, accessed July 31, 2020.
35. Pisciotta, "Witness," 2.
36. See Azeen Ghorayshi, "Astronomers Clash over a Giant Telescope on a Sacred Hawaiian Mountain," BuzzFeed News (Apr. 11, 2015), www.buzzfeednews.com/article/azeenghorayshi/scientists-and-native-hawaiians-clash-over-construction-of-1, accessed Sept. 9, 2021; and John Edward Huth, "The Thirty Meter Telescope Can Show Us the Universe. But at What Cost?" *New York Times* (Nov. 6, 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/opinion/mauna-kea-telescope.html, accessed Sept. 9, 2021/
37. *Olelo No'eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*, coll. & trans. Mary Kawena Pukui (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1983), 234.

12 THE SYMBOLISM OF SACRED MOUNTAINS

1. *Mahabharata* 3.43.21–25, adapted from a translation in J. A. B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahabharata*, vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 308.

2. The quote is from Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1974), 99. For a survey of selected sacred mountains, see W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *Cuchama and Sacred Mountains*, ed. Frank Waters and Charles L. Adams (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 39–83. A more comprehensive survey is Paul Gayet-Tancrède (Samivel), *Hommes, cimes et dieux: les grandes mythologies de l'altitude et la légende dorée des montagnes à traverse le monde* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973).
3. On mountains as sacred centers, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 36–39. Jonathan Z. Smith contests Eliade and argues that many sacred centers are chosen for political, sociological, or even random reasons – see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1–23.
4. Ps. 125:1–2.
5. Ngai Tahu quote from a panel at the tribe's visitor center at Lake Pukaki.
6. There are many scholarly works on pilgrimage – for example, Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). For personal experiences of pilgrimage to sacred sites, see Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2012).
7. Mark Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) is an anthology that brings together many of these theories.
8. For seminal pieces by these two authors see I. A. Richards, "The Philosophy of Rhetoric"; and Max Black, "Metaphor," in Johnson, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 48–62 and 63–82.
9. Paul Ricoeur has focused on the effects of tension in metaphors – see by him "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," in Johnson, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 228–47. Where Ricoeur says that literary metaphors create new worlds and meanings, I would argue that metaphors connected with sacred mountains evoke experiences in which people see what they consider a deeper reality that already exists.

13 MOUNTAINS AND THE SACRED IN LITERATURE AND ART

1. Translated from *Kumarasambhava* 1.1, 1.3.
2. For a translation of the entire poem, see Kalidasa, *The Origin of the Young God: Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava*, trans. Hank Heifetz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).
3. For a French translation of the poem, see Paul Demiéville, "La montagne dans l'art litéraire chinois," *France-Asie/Asia* 20 (1965), 24.
4. For a French version, see Demiéville, "Montagne," 30. For Li Bo and his poetry, see Arthur Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po, 701–762 A.D.* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950).
5. Basho, *The Narrow Road to the North and other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 125.
6. Fuji and the cherry blossoms from Basho, *The Narrow* Road, 98. For another translation of the Haiku, see ibid., 51.
7. *The Manyoshu: The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai Translation of One Thousand Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 215.
8. *Purgatorio* 4.88–96, translated in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, vol. 2 (Princeton University Press, 1973), 41.
9. Translated from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1976), 45.
10. Rousseau, *Nouvelle Héloïse*, 45–46.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), 39.
12. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 336.

13. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 174.
14. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 606–7.
15. Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 626.
16. Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 900.
17. For "Meru," see Richard J. Finneran, ed. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition* (New York: Macmillan, Collier Books, 1989), 289.
18. "The Second Coming," in *Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 187.
19. William Butler Yeats, "Introduction," in Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, *The Holy Mountain: Manasarovar and the Mount Kailas*, trans. Shri Purohit Swami, repr. ed. (Delhi: India Bibliographies Bureau and Balaji Enterprises, 1986 [1934]), 37.
20. Told to me by David Robertson, who knew the climbers and heard the story from Connor O'Brien. Robertson describes the outings to Wales – but without mention of the Yeats incident – in David Robertson, *George Mallory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).
21. Ernest Hemingway, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 3.
22. Hemingway, "Snows," 27.
23. René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*, trans. Roger Shattuck (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1974), 42.
24. Daumal, *Mount Analogue*, 100.
25. Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 103.
26. Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Landscape Painting: The Sui and T'ang Dynasties*, vol. 2 (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 66.
27. Catalogue of the collection of the emperor Hui-tsung, translated in John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute in America, 1985), 53.
28. Kuo Hsi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, trans. Shio Sakanishi (London: John Murray, 1935), 33 and 30–31. For more on mountains in Chinese art, see Kiyohiko Munakata, *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
29. Shipposanka Rojin Ahoryo, translated in Henry DeWitt Smith II, introduction and commentary, *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji* (New York and Tokyo: George Braziller, 1988), 212. Smith proposes that Hokusai depicted Fuji as a means of attaining longevity.
30. Smith, *Hokusai*, 7. Smith discusses the significance of Hokusai's name and its bearing on his relationship to Fuji.
31. Hugo Munsterberg, *The Landscape Painting of China and Japan* (Rutland, and Tokyo: Charles Tuttle, 1955), 123.
32. On the development of landscape painting in the West, see Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, new ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). For a history of Western art focused on mountains, see Helmuth Zebhauser, "Man Has Always Painted Mountains," trans. Diana Stone Peters and Frederick G. Peters, in *The Big Book of Mountaineering*, ed. Bruno Moravetz (Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1980), 99–104. On Friedrich's mountain paintings, see Linda Seigel, "The Riesengebirge as a Transcendental Image in Friedrich's Art," in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979), 189–93.
33. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1883), 350. On Ruskin's relation to the Romantic Movement and the religious and spiritual dimensions of his thought, see David Anthony Downes, *Ruskin's Landscape of Beatitude* (New York and Berne: Peter Lang, 1984).
34. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, 271–72. The values that Ruskin shared with Chinese artist is pointed out in Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1979), 4–5.
35. Quoted in Ralf A. Britsch, *Bierstadt and Ludlow: Painter and Writer in the West* (Provo, 1980), 31.

36. On Bierstadt and his influence, see William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986).
37. Clark, *Landscape*, 226. On art as a priestly vocation, see Cézanne's letter to Ambrose Vollard, Jan. 9, 1903, in Paul Cézanne, *Correspondance*, ed. John Rewald (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1937), 252.
38. Quotes translated from Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne* (Paris: Les Éditions Bernheim-Jeune, 1926), 134, 131, 136. Some scholars maintain that Gasquet, who knew Cézanne well, romanticized the artist and put words into the latter's mouth. The contemporary was Emile Bernard – see Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne et lettres* (Paris: A La Rénovation Esthétique, 1946), 27. Cézanne spoke of his "strong sensation of nature" in a letter to Lous Aurenche, Jan. 25, 1904, in Cézanne, *Correspondance*, 257.
39. Frederic Edwin Church, "Cotopaxi, 1862," Detroit Institute of the Arts, www.dia.org/art/collection/object/cotopaxi-37907, accessed July 30, 2020.
40. Ansel Adams and Mary Street Alinder, *Ansel Adams, an Autobiography* (New York and Boston: New York Graphic Society Books, Little, Brown, 1985), 143.
41. Adams, *Autobiography*, 382.
42. This chapter has focused on literature and painting, where the role of mountains is most apparent. Mountains also awaken a sense of the sacred in other forms of art, such as architecture, music, drama, and cinema.

14 THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF MOUNTAINEERING

1. Ellen Lapham quoted in Maitland Zane, "Bay Woman Taking Aim at Everest," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Aug. 13, 1986).
2. *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 6, 1988). The transmission took place on May 5, 1988.
3. George Mallory, "Mont Blanc from the Col du Géant by the Eastern Buttress of Mont Maudit," *The Alpine Journal* 32, no. 218 (1918), 162.
4. Isaac Rosenfeld, "Speaking of Books," *The New York Times Book Review* (Jan. 23, 1955).
5. F. S. Smythe, *Camp Six: An Account of the 1933 Mount Everest Expedition*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 243.
6. George Leigh Mallory quoted in Thomas F. Hornbein, *Everest: The West Ridge* (San Francisco and New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books, 1968), 24. David Robertson, who wrote the authoritative biography of Mallory, told me he suspected the quote may have come from a newspaper reporter's account of a lecture Mallory gave at the Broadhurst Theater in New York on February 4, 1923.
7. F. W. Bourdillon, "Another Way of Mountain Love," *The Alpine Journal* 24, no. 180 (1908), 160; and Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna*, trans. Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), 311.
8. Dahr Jamail, *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 211.
9. Bernard Amy, "Plaidoyer pour les sommets du monde," from "Sommets," *Reliefs* 8 (2018), https://reliefseditions.com/sommets/.
10. Sir William Martin Conway, *Mountain Memories: Pilgrimage of Romance* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1920), 21–22.
11. Catherine Destivelle, quoted in Les Éditions du Mont Blanc, https://web.archive.org/web/20140406080226/http://leseditionsdumontblanc.com/editions-montagne-alpinisme, accessed Oct. 27, 2020; and Barbara Kingsolver, "Infernal Paradise," in *The Mountain Reader*, ed. John A. Murray (New York: The Lyons Press, 2000), 72.
12. Quoted from Wien's diary by Paul Bauer in *Himalayan Quest: The German Expedition to Siniolchum and Nanga Parbat*, trans. E. G. Hall (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1938), 71.
13. Julie Tullis, *Clouds from Both Sides* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987), 299.

14. Louis F. Reichardt and William F. Unsoeld, "Nanda Devi from the North," *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no. 51 (1977), 22; Herzog, *Annapurna*, 276; and Tullis, *Clouds from Both Sides*, 276.
15. Edward Whymper, *Scrambles amongst the Alps in the Years 1860–69*, 5th ed. (London: John Murray, 1900), 387–88.
16. "Reinhold Messner: Why does Man Climb?" in *Nepal*, ed. John Gottberg Anderson, 7th ed. (Singapore: APA Publications, 1989), 287.
17. Doug Scott, "On the Profundity Trail," *Mountain* 15 (May 1971), 15.
18. John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 56.
19. Geoffrey Winthrop Young, *The Influence of Mountains upon the Development of Human intelligence*, (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Co., 1957), 14.
20. William O. Douglas, *Of Men and Mountains* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 328.
21. Herzog, *Annapurna*, 311; Arlene Blum, *Breaking Trail: A Climbing Life* (New York and London: Scribner, 2005), 74; and Yvon Chouinard, quoted in Doug Robinson, "The Climber as Visionary," in *Voices for the Earth: A Treasury of the Sierra Club Bulletin*, ed. Ann Gilliam (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1979), 290. Robinson's article examines the causes and effects of the visionary state in climbing.
22. W. H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1951), 23.
23. On the spiritual symbolism of mountain climbing, see Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London: P. Owen, 1960), 13–35. For other works on related matters pertaining to mountaineering, see the Select Bibliography.
24. From a letter by Pope Pius XI translated in "Alpine Notes," *The Alpine Journal* 35, no. 227 (1923), 296.
25. Guido Rey, *The Matterhorn*, trans. J. E. C. Eaton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 126–27.
26. Sir Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 194–95.
27. Tullis, *Clouds from Both Sides,* 220; and Anatoli Boukreev, *Above the Clouds: The Diaries of a High-Altitude Mountaineer*, ed. Linda Wylie, trans. Natalia Lagovskaya and Barbara Poston (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 36–37.
28. Herzog, *Annapurna*, 311.

15 SACRED MOUNTAINS, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

1. Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna*, trans. Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), 12.
2. John Muir, "Explorations in the Great Tuolumne Cañon," in *Voices for the Earth: A Treasury of the Sierra Club Bulletin*, ed. Ann Gilliam (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1979), 6.
3. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton University Press, 1971), 317–18. See also Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).
4. Han Hung in Witter Bynner, trans., *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 18.
5. On climate change and glacial retreat in mountains, see Jamail, *The End of Ice*; Ben Orlove, Ellen Wiegandt, and Brian H. Luckman, eds., *Darkening Peaks: Glacier Retreat, Science, and Society* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008); and Emily Wax, "A Sacred River Endangered by Global Warming," *Washington Post* (June 17, 2007), www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/16/AR2007061600461.html. See also www.statista.com/statistics/265510/countries-with-the-largest-coal-consumption, accessed Sept. 6, 2021.
6. Robert E. Rhoades, Xavier Zapata Ríos, and Jenny Aragundy, "Climate Change in Cotacachi," *Development with Identity: Community, Culture and Sustainability in the Andes*, ed. Robert E. Rhodes (Walingford, UK and Cambridge, MA: CABI Publishing, 2006), 69–71.
7. Elizabeth A. Allison, "The Spiritual Significance of Glaciers in an Age of

Climate Change," *WIREs Climate Change* 6 no. 5 (2015), 497. Johan Reinhard, personal communication.

8. Ramsha Munir, Umer Khayyam, and Iftikhar Hussain Adil, "Perceptions of Glacier Grafting: An Indigenous Technique of Water Conservation for Food Security in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan," *Sustainability* 13, no. 9 (May 7, 2021), 5208.
9. "Italian Glacier Covered to Prevent It Melting," PlanetSki (July 7, 2021), https://planetski.eu/2021/07/06/italian-glacier-covered-to-prevent-it-melting; Laura Spinney, "Anti-Glacier Prayer "Worked Too Well"—Vatican Approves New Ritual," National Geographic News (Aug. 8, 2012), www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/120810-glaciers-vatican-prayer-alps-science-gobal-warming; "Pizol glacier: Swiss Hold Funeral for Ice Lost to Global Warming," BBC News (Sept. 22, 2019), www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49788483; Simon Birch, "Climate Change Is Melting the French Alps, say Mountaineers," The Guardian (Aug. 24, 2018), www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/aug/24/climate-change-is-melting-the-french-alps-say-mountaineers, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
10. Sanjeeb Phuyal, "Dammed," *The Kathmandu Post* (Dec. 3, 2016), https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2016/12/03/dammed, accessed Sept. 9, 2021.
11. On Indian environmentalists and the descent of the Ganges, see Neeru Nanda, "Who is Destroying the Himalayan Forests?" in *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, ed. N. K. Rusomji and Charles Ramble (Shimla and New Delhi: Indian Institute of Advanced Study and Indus Publishing Company, 1990), 48–60.
12. On the Badrinath project, see A. N. Purohit and Edwin Bernbaum, "Badrinath: Pilgrimage and Conservation in the Himalayas," in *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, ed. Darrell Addison Posey (London: United National Environmental Programme, 1999), 336–37.
13. Quote adapted from Isabella Bird, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (New York:G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1879), 114. For the Dalai Lama quote, see Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, *My Tibet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles:University of California Press, 1990), 45.

    On the program with National Parks, see Edwin Bernbaum, "The Spiritual and Cultural Significance of Nature: Inspiring Connections between People and Parks," in *Science, Conservation, and National Parks*, ed. Steven R. Beissinger, David D. Ackerly, Holly Doremus, and Gary E. Machlis (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2017), 294–315. For more on the role of sacred natural sites and the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in conservation and ecology, see *Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology*, https://fore.yale.edu, accessed Nov. 22, 2020, as well as various works in the Select Bibliography.
14. Bas Verschuuren et al., *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature: Guidance for Protected and Conserved Area Governance and Management,* Best Practice Protected Areas Guidelines Series No. 32 (Gland: IUCN, 2021), 48, https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/49268. On the work of the CSVPA, see www.csvpa.org, accessed Dec. 15, 2020.
15. On the Ganges and waste, see Kelly D. Alley, "Ganga and Gandagi: Interpretations of Pollution and Waste in Banaras," *Ethnology* 33, no. 2 (spring 1994), 127–45. On national sacrifice areas, see Christopher McLeod, *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* (Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 1983), DVD.
16. W. H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1951), 34.
17. From the *Manasakhanda* of the *Skanda Purana*, adapted from a translation in Edwin T. Atkinson, *Kumaun Hills: Its History, Geography and Anthropology with Reference to Garhwal and Nepal* (Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1974), 307–8.
18. Dogen, "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye," 48–49.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Additional references used in this book appear in the Notes.

Allen, Charles. *A Mountain in Tibet: The Search for Mount Kailas and the Sources of the Great Rivers of Asia*. London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2013.

Allison, Elizabeth A. "The Spiritual Significance of Glaciers in an Age of Climate Change." *WIREs Climate Change* 6 no. 5 (2015), 493–508.

Anati, Emmanuel. *The Mountain of God*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986.

Atkinson, Edwin T. *Kumaun Hills: Its History, Geography and Anthropology with Reference to Garhwal and Nepal*. Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1974.

Baker, Dwight Condo. *T'ai Shan: An Account of the Sacred Eastern Peak of China*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1925.

Bartlett, Phil. *The Undiscovered Country: The Reason We Climb*. Leicester, UK: The Ernest Press, 1993.

Bastien, Joseph W. *Mountain of the Condor: Metaphor and Ritual in an Andean Ayllu*. American Ethnological Society Monographs 64. St. Paul, MN: West Pub. Co, 1978.

Beckwith, Martha Warren. *Hawaiian Mythology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940.

Bernbaum, Edwin. "Sacred Mountains: Themes and Teachings." *Mountain Research and Development* 26, no. 4 (2006), 304–9.

"The Spiritual and Cultural Significance of Nature: Inspiring Connections between People and Parks." In *Science, Conservation, and National Parks*, edited by Steven R. Beissinger, David D. Ackerly, Holly Doremus, and Gary E. Machlis, 294–315. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

The Way to Shambhala. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980.

Birnbaum, Raoul. "The Manifestation of a Monastery: Shen-ying's Experiences on Mount Wu-T'ai in a T'ang Context." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 1 (1986), 119–37.

Blacker, Carmen. *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1975.

Bryce, James. *Transcaucasia and Ararat*. 4th ed. rev. London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1896.

Bubriski, Kevin and Abhimanyu Pandey. *Kailash Yatra: A Long Walk to Mt Kailash through Humla*. Gurgaon, India: Penguin Random House India, 2018.

Carpenter, Cecilia Svinth. *Where the Waters Begin: The Traditional Nisqually Indian History of Mount Rainier*. Seattle: Discover Your Northwest, 2015.

Carter, H. Adams. "The Goddess Nanda and Place Names of the Nanda Devi Region." *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no. 51 (1977), 24–29.

Chavannes, Edouard. *Le T'ai chan: essai de monographie d'un culte chinois*. Annales du Musée Guimet 21. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910.

Chou, Wen-shing. *Mount Wutai: Visions of a Sacred Buddhist Mountain*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Clark, Ella E. *Indian Legends of the Northwest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953.

Clifford, Richard J. *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Cousineau, Phil. *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*. San Francisco: Conari Press, 2012.

Covarrubias, Miguel. *Island of Bali*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946.

Daumal, René. *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*. Translated by Roger Shattuck. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books Inc., 1974.

Davy, Marie-Madeleine. *La montagne et sa symbolique*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1996.

De Beer, Gavin Rylands. *Early Travellers in the Alps*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1930.

De Laguna, Frederica. *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 7: 1–3. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.

DeMallie, Raymond J., and Douglas R. Parks, eds. *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Demièville, Paul. "La montagne dans l'art littéraire chinois." *France-Asie/Asia* 20 (1965), 7–32.

Dudley, Nigel, Liza Higgins-Zogib, and Stephanie Mansourian. *Beyond Belief: Linking Faiths and Protected Areas to Support Biodiversity Conservation*. Gland, Switzerland and Manchester, UK: WWF and ARC, 2005.

Duncan, Barbara, ed. *Living Stories of the Cherokee*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Dundas, Charles. *Kilimanjaro and Its People: A History of the Wachagga, Their Laws, Customs and Legends, together with Some Account of the Highest Mountain in Africa*. 1924. Reprint. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968.

Durán, Diego. *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*. Translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975.

Earhart, H. Byron. *Mount Fuji: Icon of Japan*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011.

A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendo: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion. Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970.

Einarsen, John, ed. *The Sacred Mountains of Asia*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995.

Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. New York: New American Library, 1974.

Emerson, Nathaniel Bright. *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*. Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 38. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909.

Evans-Wentz, W. Y. *Cuchama and Sacred Mountains*. Edited by Frank Waters and Charles L. Adams. Chicago: Swallow Press; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981.

Fox, David J. Stuart. *Once a Century: Pura Besakih and the Eka Dasa Rudra Festival*. Jakarta: Penerbit Citra Indonesia, 1982.

Gayet-Tancrède (Samivel), Paul. *Hommes, cimes et dieux: les grandes mythologies de l'altitude et la légende dorée des montagnes à travers le monde*. Paris: Arthaud, 1973.

Gesner, Conrad. *On the Admiration of Mountains*. Translated by H. B. D. Soulé. San Francisco: The Grabhorn Press, 1937.

Govinda, Lama Anagarika. *The Way of the White Clouds*. Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1970.

Grapard, Allan G. "Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions." *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982), 195–221.

Gutmann, Bruno. "Chagga Folk-Lore." In *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, edited by J. A. Hutchinson, 50–55. Dar Es Salaam: Tanzania Society, 1974.

Hakeda, Yoshito S. *Kukai: Major Works*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.

Hamilton, Lawrence S. "When the Sacred Encounters Economic Development in Mountains." *The George Wright Forum* 32, no. 2 (2015), 132–40.

Hamsa, Bhagwan Shri. *The Holy Mountain: Manasarovar and the Mount Kailas*. Translated by Shri Purohit Swami. 1934. Reprint. Delhi: India Bibliographies Bureau and Balaji Enterprises, 1986.

Heine-Geldern, Robert. *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*. Data Papers 13. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1956.

Herzog, Maurice. *Annapurna*. Translated by Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952.

Hiroshi, Miyake. *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion*, edited by H. Byron Earhart. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2001.

Hori, Ichiro. "Mountains and Their Importance for the Idea of the Other World." *History of Religions* 6, no. 1 (1966), 1–23.

Hotchkis, Anna M., and Mary Augusta Mullikan. *The Nine Sacred Mountains of China: An Illustrated Record of Pilgrimages Made in the Years 1935–1936*. Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee Ltd., 1973.

Huber, Toni, and Tsepak Rigzin. "A Tibetan Guide for Pilgrimage to Ti-se (Mount Kailas) and mTsho Ma-pham (Lake Manasarovar)." *The Tibet Journal* 20, no. 1 (1995), 10–47.

Irving, R. L. G., ed. *The Mountain Way: An Anthology in Prose and Verse*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1938.

Ives, Jack, and Bruno Messerli, eds. *Mountains of the World – A Global Priority*. Oxford: Parthenon, 1997.

Jamail, Dahr. *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption*. New York: The New Press, 2019.

Jenkins, Willis, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017.

Jetté, Julius. "On Ten'a Folklore." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), 298–367.

Johnson, Mark, ed. *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.

Johnson, Russell, and Kelly Moran. *The Sacred Mountain of Tibet: On Pilgrimage to Mount Kailas*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1989.

Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1938.

Kuo Hsi. *An Essay on Landscape Painting*. Translated by Shio Sakanishi. London: John Murray, 1935.

Labande, François. *Sauver la montagne*. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 2004.

Layton, Robert. *Uluru: An Aboriginal History of Ayers Rock*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986.

Levenson, Jon D. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York: Winston Press, Seabury Book, 1985.

Limburg, Antoine van. *Kailash: pélerinage tibétain*. Annemasse: Editions Boussole, 1999.

Loomis, Roger Sherman. *The Grail, from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.

Loseries-Leck, Andrea. "On the Sacredness of Mount Kailasa in Indian and Tibetan Sources." In *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, edited by Alex McKay, 149–52. Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1998.

Mabbett, Ian W. "The Symbolism of Mount Meru." *History of Religions* 23, no. 1 (1983), 64–83.

MacFarlane, Robert. *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Margolin, Malcolm. *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories and Songs*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1981.

Mathieu, Jon. *The Third Dimension: A Comparative History of Mountains in the Modern Era*. Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011.

"The Sacralization of Mountains in Europe during the Modern Age." *Mountain Research and Development* 26 no. 4 (2006), 343–49.

McKay, Alex. *Kailas Histories Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015.

Meade, Charles. *High Mountains*. London: Harvill, 1954.

Morrison, Hedda. *Hua Shan: The Taoist Sacred Mountain in West China*. Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee Ltd., 1973.

Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*. Garden City, NY: The Natural History Library/Anchor Books, 1961.

The Yosemite. 1914. Reprint. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988.

Nabokov, Peter. *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de. *Where the Gods are Mountains: Three Years among the People of the Himalayas*. Translated by Michael Bullock. New York: Reynal and Co., 1957.

Nicoloff, Philp L. *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963.

Nimmo, H. Arlo. "Pele's Journey to Hawai'i: An Analysis of the Myths." *Pacific Studies* 11, no. 1 (1987), 1–42.

Orbell, Margaret. *The Natural World of the Maori*. Auckland: Collins/Bateman, 1985.

Orlove, Ben, Ellen Wiegandt, and Brian H. Luckman, eds. *Darkening Peaks: Glacier Retreat, Science, and Society*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Pallis, Marco. *The Way and the Mountain*. London: P. Owen, 1960.

Palmer, Martin. *Travels through Sacred China*. London and San Francisco: Thorsons, 1996.

Paranavitana, Senerat. *The God of Adam's Peak*. Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1958.

Peralto, Leon No'eau. "Portrait. Mauna a Wākea: Hānau ka Mauna, the Piko of Our Ea." In *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty*, edited by Ikaika Hussey et al., 232–43. Panama: Duke University Press, 2014.

Porter, Bill, *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993.

Powell, Father Peter John. *People of the Sacred Mountain*. 2 vols. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

Price, Martin F., Alton C. Byers, Donald A. Friend, Thomas Kohler, and Larry W. Price, eds. *Mountain Geography: Physical and Human Dimensions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Pungetti, Gloria, Gonzalo Oviedo, and Della Hooke, eds. *Sacred Species and Sites: Advances in Biocultural Conservation*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Reichardt, Louis F., and William F. Unsoeld. "Nanda Devi from the North." *The American Alpine Journal* 21, no.51 (1977), 1–23.

Reinhard, Johan. *The Ice Maiden: Inca Mummies, Mountain Gods, and Sacred Sites in the Andes*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2005.

Reinhard, Johan and Constanza Ceruti. *Inca Rituals and Sacred Mountains: A Study of the World's Highest Archaeological Sites*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2010.

Reusch, Dr. R. "Mount Kilimanjaro and Its Ascent." In *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, edited by J. A. Hutchinson, rev. ed., 131–34. Dar Es Salaam: Tanzania Society, 1974.

Rhoades, Robert, Xavier Zapata Ríos, and Jenny Aragundy. "Climate Change in Cotacachi." In *Development with Identity: Community, Culture and Sustainability in the Andes*, edited by Robert E. Rhodes, 69–74. Wallingford, UK and Cambridge, MA: CABI Publishing, 2006.

Rock, J. F. *The Amnye Ma-chhen Range and Adjacent Regions: A Monographic Study*. Serie Orientale Roma 12. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medeo ed Estremo Oriente, 1956.

Sahagún, Bernardino de. *A History of Ancient Mexico*. Translated by Fanny R. Bandelier. Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1932.

Sallnow, Michael J. *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cusco*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.

Sarmiento, Fausto and Sarah Hitchner. *Indigeneity and the Sacred: Indigenous Revival and the Conservation of Sacred Natural Sites in the Americas*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.

Sax, William S. *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in Himalayan Pilgrimage*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Schaaf, Thomas, and Cathy Lee, eds. *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes*. Paris: UNESCO, 2006.

Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: HarperCollins, 1995.

Sherrard, Philip. *Athos, The Holy Mountain*. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1985.

Shipton, Eric. *Nanda Devi*. In *The Six Mountain-Travel Books*, edited by Jim Perrin, 15–151. 1936. Reprint. Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1985.

Siiger, Halfdan. "A Cult for the God of Mount Kanchenjunga among the Lepcha of Northern Sikkim." In *Actes du IVe congrès international des sciences anthropoloqiques et ethnologiques*, vol. 2, 185–89. Vienna: Verlag Adolf Holzhausens, 1955.

Skrobucha, Heinz. *Sinai*. Translated by Geoffrey Hunt. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Smith II, Henry D. *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji*. New York and Tokyo: George Braziller, 1988.

Snow, Chief John. *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places: The Story of the Stoney People*. Toronto and Sarasota: Samuel Stevens, 1977.

Speake, Graham. *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002.

Spoon, Jeremy. "The 'Visions of Pele' Competition and Exhibit at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park." *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 4, no. 2 (2007), 72–74.

Stevens, Stan. "Sacred and Profane Himalayas." *Natural History* 97, no. 1 (1988), 26–35.

Sullivan, Michael. *Chinese Landscape Painting: The Sui and T'ang Dynasties*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980.

Taylor, Bron R., ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 2 vols. London and New York: Continuum, 2005.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Maine Woods*. 1848. Reprint. New York: Bramhall House, 1950.

Thurman, Robert, and Ted Wise. *Circling the Sacred Mountain: A Spiritual Adventure through the Himalayas*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

Tobias, Michael Charles, and Harold Drasdo, eds. *The Mountain Spirit*. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1979.

Tullis, Julie. *Clouds from Both Sides*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987.

Turville-Petre, E. O. G. *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975.

Tyler, Royall. "A Glimpse of Mt. Fuji in Legend and Cult." *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 1, no. 2 (1981), 140–65.

UNESCO Thematic Expert Meeting on Asia-Pacific Sacred Mountains, 5–10 September 2001, Final Report. Tokyo: World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, and Wakayama Prefectural Government, 2001.

Verschuuren, Bas, and Steve Brown, eds. *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in Protected Areas: Governance, Management and Policy*. Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2019.

Verschuuren, Bas, and Naoya Furuta, eds. *Asian Sacred Natural Sites: Philosophy and Practice in Protected Areas and Conservation*. Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Verschuuren, Bas, Robert Wild, Jeffrey A. McNeely, and Gonzalo Oviedo, eds. *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture*. London and Washington, DC: Earthscan, 2010.

Wales, H. G. Quaritch. *The Universe around Them: Cosmology and Cosmic Renewal in Indianized Southeast Asia*. London: Arthur Probsthain, 1977.

Webster, Jennifer Rose. "Toward a Sacred Topography of Central Asia: Shrines, Pilgrimage, and Gender in Kyrgyzstan." PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2015.

Webster, Peter. *Rua and the Maori Millennium*. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University, 1979.

Westervelt, W. D. *Hawaiian Legends of Volcanoes*. Boston: Ellis Press, 1916.

Wulf, Andrea. *The Invention of Nature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

Wyman, Leland C. *Blessingway*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1970.